PRAISE FOR

Revealing Eden

SAVE THE PEARLS PART ONE

"*Revealing Eden* is a captivating dystopian novel!"

—*Fresh Fiction*

"Foyt doesn't just jump on the dystopian bandwagon, she grabs the horse by the reins and takes it in a whole new direction. It's a fast-paced read that will keep you on the edge of your seat. Beware, once you enter Eden's world you will be stuck pinning for the next installment to *Save The Pearls!*"

—*Book Addictions*

"The reader will never tire of feisty Eden Newman's adventures, even when you feel like shaking her. This book is highly recommended to young adult *and* adult readers."

—*Live To Read*

"Heart-pounding and devastatingly realistic, *Revealing Eden* will leave you on the edge of your seat. When the secret to Bramford's actions is revealed, you will be shocked. As Eden and Bramford fight for their lives, you will be pulled into their world."

—*The Book Shelf*

"Anyone who enjoys dystopian societies, a romantic plot line, and the evolution process of a protagonist—this is the book for you. Foyt sucked me in from the start with a dystopian society that puts humans with pale skin at the bottom of the gene pool for their lack of protection from the sun's super powered radiation. This would be a good book for parents and teens to read together and discuss race and the environment."

—*Sabrina Sumsion*

"Eden Newman is one of the most interesting characters to grace the pages of a book."

—*Jean Book Nerd*

"*Revealing Eden* is wonderfully written and the concept is unique. The derogatory terms the author creates for each ethnicity are brilliant. There are constant surprises lurking in this story that had me rushing through to the end!"

—*Bookies*

"A modern, dystopian feel to Beauty and the Beast, except Eden isn't really like Beauty, and Bramford is not completely a beast. There are so many reasons why I absolutely adored this fast-paced, beautifully written novel."

—*The ParaRomance Club*

"*Revealing Eden* caught my attention from the get-go and never let up. The story speaks to how our culture defines beauty, issues of racism, and the ever-increasing destruction of our environment."

—*Reading and Writing Urban Fantasy*

"I loved the underlying theme of the importance of being 'color blind.'"

—*The Once and Future Librarian*

"The moral of *Revealing Eden* is to find your true self, a fantastic lesson for all ages. The juxtaposition of the beauty and simplicity of Emily Dickinson's poetry with the harsh realities of the universe Foyt creates is BEAUTIFUL."

—*Book Geeks*

"The story grabbed me and didn't let go!

—*Readers Favorite*

SAVE THE PEARLS PART TWO

Adapting Eden

Also by Victoria Foyt

The Virtual Life of Lexie Diamond
Save The Pearls Part One: Revealing Eden

For Irene—

SAVE THE PEARLS PART TWO

Adapting Eden

Adapt to love!

a novel by

VICTORIA FOYT

Thanks for your generous support and luminous presence. Warmly, Victoria

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For my father

Eden is that old-fashioned House
We dwell in every day,
Without suspecting our abode
Until we drive away.
How fair, on looking back, the Day
We sauntered from the door,
Unconscious our returning
Discover it no more.

—Emily Dickinson

Prologue

FROM ATOP an Aztec pyramid, the last of its kind among the ruins of Earth, Huitzilopochtli looked out over a hidden pocket where a small tribe of Aztec people lived. Long ago they had escaped the vengeful arm of the Spanish conquistadors and taken refuge here. If not for the discovery of a miraculous healing plant, they would have died.

Now the war to end the world was coming, despite all of Huitzilopochtli's efforts to maintain balance among the gods. No one could blame him. As the sun god, he had been constant.

In olden times people had worshipped him. They had laid on glossy green fields and pristine beaches to soak up his golden touch, even written songs in his honor—"Here Comes The Sun." That had been in his heyday, the glorious 1960's.

Oh, what Huitzilopochtli wouldn't give to turn back the hands of time.

Human beings had ruined the exquisite balance that once kept the world running like a fine-tuned clock. By the end of the twenty-first century with rampant pollution, mindless consumption and the ravages of wars, mankind finally had destroyed the ozone layer that hung like a bride's veil between sky and earth and caused the Great Meltdown. Huitzilopochtli burned too brightly now. As a result, man had grown to hate him and love only war.

A keen blast of heat worked through the sun god at the thought of his polar opposite, Tezcatlipoca, the calamitous god of sorcery who ruled over night and war. The greedy fellow had surpassed his rightful place in the natural order of things.

Huitzilopochtli heaved a heavy sigh. "The girl is our only hope," he said.

Beside him, his meticulous astrologer studied a large stone calendar, the *tonalpolhualli*. How many times had he sought the answers to the world's problems in its carved images? The calendar never lied, although lately he wished it would.

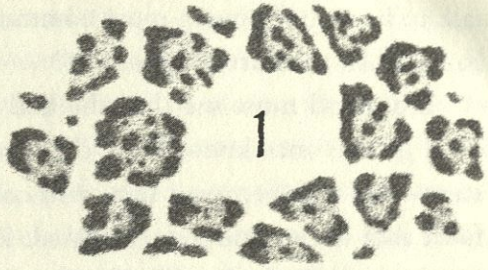
Perhaps if the rains or the wind lasted longer this year, sweet, colorful, happy flowers might run riot. What was the use? The same horrible outcome lurked at the edge of the world like a greedy thief ready to pounce.

"Yes, the war to end the world will come, unless..." The astrologer broke off, wondering if the blond one would adapt into a Jaguar Girl. But what if she and the Jaguar Man failed to form a blessed union? Even then, they might not fulfill expectations.

The sun god finished his aide's statement in a voice that roiled the air like thunder. "Unless Eden Newman accepts her destiny, all is lost. The whole world will die, and she along with it."

He lifted his gaze to the clear bank of sky as a majestic condor sailed into view. Its eight-foot wingspan spread like two hands offering a prayer for the world.

Huitzilopochtli's command struck like a blade of light that cleaved the darkness. "Get her!"



1

BRAMFORD? Can you hear me, Bramford?"

Eden leaned over him, her long blond hair falling against his dark chest like a flash of white in the deep night. By the flickering light of the campfire, she studied his impassive catlike features. In his shaman's trance he appeared even more like the Jaguar Man.

"Just nod if you understand," Eden continued. "I want you to come back. Please."

Bramford lay still on the forest floor, his eyes closed, unresponsive to her lonely plea. Why had he insisted on taking the foul-smelling herbal brew, the *bejuco de oro,* or golden drink, which sent him into a mysterious realm now? Her last night on Earth as a human being, and he had to leave her alone.

—The spirits are calling me. They have a message. I have no choice.

—What's so urgent?

—Just trust me, Eden.

That's what he always said. *Trust me.* So once more, Eden had placed her life in his hands. If only *he* would trust *her*! He never gave her the full story, but only dangled bits of information like a string of yarn to tease a kitten. She had to

talk to him about being more communicative. A beastly man could learn to share, couldn't he?

Bramford must see that she had grown from the frightened girl he once knew. Sure, they had gotten off to a rough start—she had betrayed him, you could even say it was her fault that he was now part animal. But—and this was more important—she had proved her loyalty and love ever since he had forced her to flee from their world in the underground tunnels of the Caterpillar. For Earth's sake, she deserved to know what forces affected their lives instead of hearing pat answers like when she had questioned him before he drank the powerful *bejuco de oro*.

—I'm going to adapt tomorrow, aren't I, Bramford? Your friends up in the sky aren't going to change that, are they? Cause I'll just die if I don't become a she-cat!

A wry smile had stoked his chiseled features as he pinned her with a look that made her heart flop like a fish on a hook.

—Your destiny is clear, Eden. You're mine.

That was all he gave her. And, well, it was true: she belonged to him, no matter what. But only if she adapted like him and became his kind, a Jaguar Girl, would they become mates.

It seemed inconceivable that Eden had once detested Bramford, not the Jaguar Man he had become, but the arrogant titan who owned the laboratory where her father had invented his top-secret adaptation technology. A top-rated Coal valued for his dark skin, wealth, and superior genes, Bramford could have picked anyone. Not in fifty years—as long a life as Eden could imagine—would she ever have dreamt that he would want her, a lowly Pearl with ugly white skin.

Coals hated Pearls, and Pearls feared Coals. That was how it had been ever since the Great Meltdown. Most people with less melanin in their pale skin to protect them from the deadly levels of increased solar radiation had died off. The survivors, called Pearls, had become an oppressed minority. The Coals' dark skin helped them better resist The Heat, though they suffered from it too. They formed the majority on the planet, and decided on all the rules. Even the superior label of Coal brought to mind a precious commodity that produced energy, so necessary for survival, while the term Pearl conveyed weakness, something easily crushed and useless in a post-apocalyptic world.

But here, in this last patch of hidden rainforest, everything had changed between Eden and her ex-boss, despite their racial difference. Bramford had seen past her inferior genetics to the Real Eden, and she had fallen in love with this unique, powerful creature.

She wondered what his legions of female admirers would think of him now. Would their bellies quiver when his golden-green eyes pierced them with burning looks that could melt stone? Or would those dark beauties long to feel his sensuous, velvety lips nuzzle their necks, the scrape of sharp teeth teasing between pleasure and pain? Surely, they would feel the urge to run their hands through his silky, long dark hair that tumbled down to his shoulders.

Eden's heart leaped free, like a young bird taking its first flight, as she took in a full view of Bramford's magnificent body. Her admiring gaze traveled from his savagely handsome face down the contours of his large, muscular frame, slowly tracing the loincloth made of real jaguar skin that lay

against his slim hips. She marveled at the perfect combination of genes he had inherited from the trio of animal donors her father had selected.

The black *Panthera onca,* the primary donor and the jungle's greatest predator, gave him the look of a big cat, from his golden-green eyes and wide cheekbones to his padded hands and the lithe, graceful way he moved on two feet or, when running at full speed, on all four. Even the rosettes of the jaguar's coat appeared like tattoo markings on his midnight-colored skin.

Since Eden had acted as her father's primary researcher, she knew which other animals had donated traits, although these were less apparent. Bramford's keen eyesight, a gift from the world's largest raptor, the harpy eagle, *Harpia harpyja,* served him well in the jungle. And the powerful bands of muscles that rippled along his torso came from the green acaconda, *Eunectes murinus,* a great water predator.

As a hybrid human predator, Bramford could survive in nearly any environment, especially in an overheated world. And he was no dumb animal, either; he had retained his extraordinary human intelligence. Which made him a prize, and not just for Eden.

Whoever controlled her father's adaptive technology could rule the world. All they needed was the first and only specimen, Bramford. She could just imagine the high price on his head.

Eden shuddered at the memory of their close brush with disaster when a troop of the FFP, the dreaded Federation of Free People who vowed to rid the planet of Pearls, had tracked

them to Bramford's hidden compound in the jungle. Okay, that was her fault too. If it hadn't been for the timely arrival of some neighboring warriors, they might not have escaped. The odds of surviving a second attack seemed nil.

Bramford's shoulders suddenly twitched, a tortured expression lined his features. He mumbled something unintelligible, perhaps in his shaman's language.

Eden picked up one clear phrase and pursued it. "What about a jaguar's paw? Can you say more?"

He fell silent again, his face a smooth mask. Cold, bright stars etched peepholes into a pitch-black sky that hung like a shroud over the night. She stared up at them, imagining his spirit flying on the other side in a bright world.

He had promised to return by dawn, and by midday she would adapt at her father's makeshift laboratory. Soon she would become a powerful she-cat, free to be Bramford's mate.

Breathe, Eden. Just relax.

She took in the sweet, intoxicating aroma that laced the night air, and from years of research into flora and fauna that was extinct in her world, identified its source as Angel's trumpet, *Brugmansia species* "Feingold." Indigenous cultures had mixed it with maize beer as a drug for sacrificial victims. Indeed, Eden noted that the scent made her feel drowsy.

Giving into the drag of sleep, she nestled into the warm hollow under Bramford's arm. He purred as she snuggled beside him, a soft, inviting sound that never failed to excite her. He might be the most awesome creature on the planet, but sometimes he was a pussycat. Her breath tuned to his slow

beat, her hips molded with his. His musky scent filled her head like a cloud that carried her over the horizon into a lush picture-postcard valley.

Then, like a slap in the face, a sharp metallic sound stung the night. Eden jerked up, her heart hammering. It could have been a cliff shearing off, or a tree falling, or even an earth tremor. It could have been many things, but it sure sounded like a laser blast.

The FFP?

Eden strained to listen, filtering out the jumble of night insects and birdcalls that whirred and buzzed, but the gut-wrenching sound did not recur. Replaying it in her mind, she convinced herself she had heard a particularly aggressive great potoo, *Nyctibius grandis,* whose haunting whistle sounded like a falling bomb.

Still, it was only a matter of time before *they* returned.

Eden shook Bramford. "Wake up, please!"

He turned his head away, mumbling incoherently. It was impossible to break the drug's hold. She settled back into his warm embrace with a sigh, moving his arm around her shoulders as if he were a poseable Ken doll, like girls collected in the old days when they weren't pressured to mate by their eighteenth birthday. People often lived into their eighties then, and some, unbelievably, past a hundred.

In the tunnels, you were lucky to live to forty. At seventeen, Eden was already middle-aged and, without a mate, she would have been left to die. But that was all in the past. Now she had found love, a bright future, and good friends.

Stop imagining the worst. Be happy.

But happiness fit her like a stiff pair of new shoes, or

the old white dress she wore, which had belonged to Bramford's dead mate, Rebecca. Eden needed to adopt a brand-new attitude.

To her surprise, an ancient poem popped into her head. Eden's mother, in her crazy wisdom, had virtually adopted Emily Dickinson, a poet from the 1800s, as their aunt and insisted that Eden accompany her for long stretches in "Emily's World," where they interacted with 3-D Holo-Images from the poet's life. As a result, Eden had memorized a large part of her work.

At first Eden had dismissed the poems of love and longing as useless relics from a time when emotions mattered. But ever since she entered this natural world, Aunt Em's words had begun to make sense. Like this one, the poems made Eden feel understood.

I can wade grief,
Whole pools of it,—
I'm used to that.
But the least push of joy
Breaks up my feet,
And I tip—drunken.
Let no pebble smile,
'T was the new liquor,—
That was all!

In the eerie calm that preceded dawn, a collared forest falcon, *Micrastur semitorquatus,* issued a loud *aw* note, over and over, that broke against Eden's deep sleep. She slipped back into consciousness, like a stream twisting around sev-

eral large rocks, recalling the exciting facts that lay before her: today she would adapt, leave behind her human life, and start a new one with Bramford.

A deep smile bloomed in her belly as she felt his body folded around hers. His lips nuzzled against the nape of her neck. He purred, his desire for her as clear as the hot daylight that wedged through the sparse openings in the upper canopy of trees.

Eden's body flamed with desire, a fever climbing in her limbs. But as she rolled over to face Bramford, she found him lying still as stone. She touched his chest and gasped. He had turned deathly cold.

The reason was plain to see: cactus needles were stuck into his arms and legs in a bizarre geometric pattern. Rivulets of blood ran down his sides, draining into skull-like pots that spilled over onto the ground in an ever-widening pool.

Eden jerked upward and tugged at a spine in Bramford's thigh, but it would not come out. Frantic, she tried the others with the same result. The sharp needles embedded into his skin held as if by enchantment.

Her shattering scream filled the air. "Bramford!"

He lay unmoving, his eyes shut. Mother Earth, was he dead?

Suddenly the earth shook her. It rolled her back and forth, gently at first, and then with increasing vigor.

"Eden? Wake up!" Bramford cried.

Her eyes flew open and saw no morning light. She was lying on the ground—the loamy earth that showed no stain of blood. The edge of night still cast a silvery gray hue over the world, while morning loitered in the shadows. A jubilant

chorus of birdsong struck the air like an army reveille as the night denizens began to pass the baton to the day shift.

Just a bad dream?

Eden blinked back her confusion, staring at Bramford. The dusky light played over his feline nose, the hard ridge of his brow, the slash of cheekbones, and the full, wide mouth.

"Are you all right, Eden?" His raspy voice, deep and strong, chased away her terror.

Her breath rushed out. "Sweet Mother Earth, I thought you were dead."

Bramford swept his hand over her face, pushing back her long golden hair. His emerald eyes pulled her to him like magnetic beams. She laid her head on his warm chest, comforted by the steady beat of his heart.

"I'm sorry," he said, gathering her in his arms. "It was a mistake to bring you here."

"A mistake?"

He pressed her tighter to him and spoke with his usual measured confidence. "Never mind. Everything will be fine as long as we stay in the jungle."

She gave a nervous laugh. "Well, that's good, because I'll always be with you."

"Promise me, Eden. No matter what happens you'll never go back to the tunnels."

She tilted her head to look him in the eye. Behind the confident gaze she detected a glimmer of fear. "What is it?"

"Just promise me you won't ever leave." The window of vulnerability already snapped shut.

Eden's heart skipped a beat. "I saw what you saw, in my dream, didn't I—like some kind of contagion? Needles drain-

ing your blood, and you dying. That's why you said it was a mistake to bring me along. Please, tell me, Bramford."

Again he offered those words that both appeased and frustrated. "Just trust me."

Finally, the opening she needed. "We're practically mates. Why won't you let me into your confidence?"

He bristled with a darkening of eye, the tightening of his jaw. "But I've already let you in. You're with me, aren't you?"

This was going to be harder than Eden thought. She tried a more patient tack. "But you haven't told me how you feel about staying here or explained what the risks are. Can't we discuss it?"

"You're not listening. You must promise never to return to the tunnels."

"But—"

"I insist."

Bramford shot to his feet. His lean two-hundred-pound, six-foot frame towered over her, a huge V that blocked out the early dawn. Like a drunkard stumbling towards an open bottle, Eden's gaze tripped over his steely abdomen to the rock-solid jaw and landed in the fathomless pools of his eyes. A frightening but irresistible force held her in its hypnotic thrall—the thrill of loving a were-cat.

"Of course, I'm never going back," Eden said quietly. "I promise."

"Good." Bramford swept her up onto his shoulders. "We have to hurry now."

"What's wrong?"

He answered with a ferocious growl as he carried her into the forest. Eden wrapped her legs around his torso and

gripped his long hair like reins. A tribe of shrieking gibbons, *Simia lagotricha,* spun out of their path, their soft gray arms wheeling around black faces like pinwheels, their excitement as feverish as hers.

Ronson Bramford was King of the Jungle, and Eden Newman his future queen. Whatever might come, they would face it together. But as they raced ahead, the gruesome image of his body riddled with bloody needles flashed through her mind. If it had only been a dream—and not a vision—why did she feel as if they were speeding to their doom?

2

BRAMFORD RAN like the wind, carrying Eden on his shoulders, dodging and darting through the tangled forest. Streams of soft morning light angled through the jungle canopy, offering pockets of illumination along the way. She leaned her hips against the back of his neck, thrilling to the pulse of his muscles against hers. His hands clamped onto her bare thighs, the pressure hot and demanding.

The sudden realization that this would be her last ride filled Eden with a twinge of regret. Once she adapted, she would be nearly as big as him. Might as well enjoy it while she could!

Faster, she thought, clamping her thighs tight around his chest to convey her command. Her wild man obeyed with a thrilling roar. If only she could get him to communicate as easily.

From the beginning he had been secretive, operating the laboratory in the tunnels with a hidden agenda. How could Eden have known that he had an illegal albino son hidden in a remote corner of Earth? She never would have guessed that Bramford's genome had such a terrible defect.

Of course, if not for his conniving first mate, his deep dark secret would never have been revealed. Whether Rebecca had

acted alone or been a dupe of the FFP, her falsified genome hid the crucial fact that, like Bramford, she was a carrier of the albinism gene. And as everyone knew, two carriers had a high risk of producing a Cotton, as albinos were called.

In an effort to purify the human races, the Uni-Gov had eradicated albinism, or so they proclaimed. Bramford's son, Logan, proved otherwise. Bramford had brought him here, and funded the adaptation research, all in an effort to save him. Logan's translucent skin would never protect him against solar radiation, even here in the leafy rainforest. And if the sun's rays didn't kill him, eventually *they* would. Logan had no choice but to adapt.

If only Bramford had shared his plans with Eden sooner, many of the misunderstandings between them might have been avoided. But that was all in the past, and so was his ill-fated union with Rebecca. The FFP had killed her when she attempted to trade her son's whereabouts for her freedom and Bramford had refused to cooperate.

Now future belonged to him and Eden. *Be happy.*

Soon she recognized the worn path to the compound that Bramford had built with the help of a small remnant of the Huaorani tribe. The jungle opened like curtains onto a stage, and Bramford stepped into broad daylight. He growled with a mixture of curiosity and warning.

Eden squinted into the stark tropical glare when a sudden movment near the entry gate caught her eye. She turned, expecting to see one of her Indian friends. Instead the appearance of two terrifying jaguars startled her.

"Relax," Bramford said, giving her legs a reassuring squeeze.

"But—"

"I've got it under control."

Something odd about the two big cats struck Eden as the shock subsided. That was it: they were standing upright, their clawed paws dangling over bare human feet. Their velvety russet hides rippled wide as a breeze rose, revealing the squat bodies underneath. Atop their heads, huge open jaws framed other faces with deep brown eyes, wrong in color for a jaguar, if not in fierceness. Most telling, they carried wooden shields edged with feathers and deadly spears embedded with sharp obsidian blades. They were men in jaguar costumes, lethal men.

Their choice of animal avatar spoke of their reverence for Bramford. Many centuries ago, shamans had prophesied the coming of the Jaguar Man who would save them and their lands from destruction. But El Tigre, as they called him, had arrived a bit late. Still, if he had a mate with whom he could begin a new species of hybrid humans and restart Earth's clock...well, things might improve, after all.

Bramford set Eden down and indicated the taller of the two warriors. "This is Jaguar Paw," he said. "And Scroll Jaguar." The other man bore a deep scar across his cheek.

As usual, Bramford was full of surprises. "You know them?" Eden asked.

"I was told to meet them."

"So that's how it works." Recalling the words "jaguar paw" that he had muttered during his trance, she realized he must have received "instructions" to meet them. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Bramford sighed. "I can't tell you everything, for your own protection."

"Oh." Perhaps when she adapted and they were on equal footing he would be more forthcoming.

The strangers fixed Eden with a mysterious look that sent a chill up her spine. She thought she saw a glimmer of respect, or even awe, in their eyes. But that was ridiculous, probably just a trick of the early light.

The warriors' distinctive broad, smooth faces and the folds at the corners of their almond-shaped eyes suggested that they belonged to a tribe long descended from the Aztecs, the very same one that had helped fight against the FFP. Since they were younger than the men who had come to their rescue—possibly, like Eden, in their late teens—it meant the tribe must be much larger than she had assumed.

"Come," Bramford said, leading her into the compound.

Eden had to raise her arm to meet his grasp, the marked difference in their heights a reminder of her pressing need to adapt. She heard the jaguar warriors follow behind; the latch of the gate closed with an ominous snap. Her back tensed, and she scooted forward to avoid their sharp blades.

As soon as they entered the tidy compound of palm-thatched huts, she saw her Huaorani friends gathered by the central fire pit. Their expressions, usually as accepting as the soft earth upon which they stood, were wrinkled with anxiety, their naked bellies taut with tension. Even María, who never appeared ruffled, seemed on edge.

Her sister-in-law, Lucy, craddled her toddler, Carlito, whose whimpering reflected the thick tension. María's young daughters, Carmen and Etelvina, eight and seven years old respectively, sat nearby, whispering among themselves. Their pet macaw perched in a nearby tree, squawking. The group

watched in silence as the jaguar warriors strode to a shaded spot by the main hut and stood there, as silent as trees.

Like a small, thin wraith, an eight-year-old boy covered from head to toe in black clothing flew out of the farthest hut and cried out. "Father!" Logan's pink eyes strained as he ran pell-mell across the open clearing.

Eden's yellow Labrador retriever followed at his heels, barking loudly. Reaching her, the dog jumped up to greet her. She had named him Austin for Emily Dickinson's brother, but more often called him by his nickname.

"Hey, Buddy," she said, running her hands through his ruff.

Bramford scooped his son into his arms. "It's all right, Logan."

The vivid contrast between the terrified young albino and the dark, powerful Jaguar Man was as sharp as day and night. And yet the deep bond that spanned the gap between them never failed to amaze Eden.

She placed a hand on Logan's shoulder as Bramford set him on the ground. The boy smiled up at her, and in a heart-breaking voice called her "Mama."

Delighted to take his mother's place, Eden smiled. Already she loved him as her own son.

Lorenzo, the leader of the Huaorani, stepped forward to speak to Bramford. He pointed in the direction they had come, and with one word, struck fear in Eden's heart. "*Cowode.*" It meant non-human, or anyone who wasn't a member of their tribe. To her, it signaled her worst fear: someone was out there.

Lorenzo continued in Spanish, a language that bridged

the communication barrier between the Indians and the foreigners. Fortunately, years of listening to her Life-Band's automatic translations had given Eden a moderate grasp of Spanish.

He said that he had found tracks in the jungle while he and his portly sibling, Charlie, had been hunting. Bramford looked unimpressed, which suggested that he already knew. Cold sheets of fear pressed against Eden's chest; the laser blast had been real!

"The FFP?" she asked in a tremulous voice.

"Perhaps," Bramford said. "But there are other equally dangerous factions that would like to get their hands on your father's technology. We must leave at once."

"But we can't!"

He jerked his head towards the group of Huaorani. "As you can see, they're ready to go. There's no time to waste."

Indeed, their meager belongings—hemp bags filled with herbs and vegetables, and some crude tools—were piled in the center of camp. Everyone knew, it seemed, except Eden.

"I can't leave now," she said. "For Earth's sake, don't you remember? I'm going to adapt today!"

Bramford chuckled, though it sounded more like a soft cough.

She put her hands on her hips. "What's so funny?"

"I wouldn't have blamed you if you told me you'd changed your mind."

The vulnerability in his eyes, so different than his fierce power, cut short her irritation. He put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her against him. As the soft dark fur that spotted his skin tickled her face, Eden let out a long sigh.

"Have you?" she said softly. "Changed your mind, that is?"

His lips brushed the top of her head, and he made a mewing sound that drove her crazy. "Never."

"But then, when will I adapt?"

Bramford looked her in the eye. "Don't you know by now that I have your best interests at heart, Eden? I'll take care of you."

She started to say that actually *she* had helped save *him* during the FFP attack, but the words caught in her throat. On that score, they were even; after all, he had saved her several times, including once from the death squeeze of an anaconda.

The cracking voice of a fourteen-year-old male interrupted them. "Hi, Eden!"

She turned to find Kevon rounding the dirt path that led from the laboratory. Half a head taller than she, and gangly, his café au lait skin branded him as mixed breed, half Coal, half Pearl. Perhaps because he had no family left, and she had always wanted a sibling, or maybe because she simply liked the affable youth, they had bonded, despite the fact that he had been a member of the FFP troop that had attempted to take Bramford prisoner. Even now, his tattered camouflage uniform brought to mind the enemy.

Kevon would have died in that fight too, if the Aztec warriors had not spared him. Eden often wondered why, but who was she to question their ancient wisdom?

Besides, the young man's story seemed plausible: an orphan with nowhere to go, he had sought refuge in a radical group in order to survive. Eden knew all about taking stupid risks. If she hadn't trusted her duplicitous ex-boyfriend

Jamal, a spy for the FFP, and divulged her father's secret plans to adapt humans, Bramford wouldn't have become a hybrid, and they would never have been forced to escape the tunnels.

But she couldn't think about that now. She had to let go of the past. *Be happy.*

She took her example from Kevon, whose suffering had not crushed his spirit. That was plain to see in the genuine smile he gave her. Even the dimple in the middle of his chin—another thing she liked about him—seemed to radiate happiness.

She smiled back. "Hi, Little Brother."

"Hey, Sis," he said, as he reached her.

If the Jaguar Man had had a tail, he might have flicked it against Kevon "Did you lead any of your terrorist friends here?" he said hotly.

A dark cloud fell over Kevon. "Me? I hate the FFP!"

Eden placed a restraining hand on Bramford's chest. "He would never hurt us," she said. "Would you, Kevon?"

He squared his shoulders, unflinching under Bramford's withering gaze. For a young man he was brave, you had to give him that.

"Of course not," he sputtered.

Bramford looked at Kevon's wrist. "Where's your Life-Band?" he said, lunging past Eden. He grabbed Kevon by his tattered shirt. "Did you send a signal?"

"You took it, don't you remember?" Kevon cried.

Eden flashed on the exact moment when the Aztec warriors disappeared and Bramford confronted the trembling teen boy. Right from the start, he had used a grudging tone.

—If you want to stay, you'll have to give up your Life-Band.

Losing your Life-Band was like having a vital organ cut out; it connected the sensor in your head to the World Band, which stored all of the world's data. Eden had thought she would die when Bramford took hers, a copper earring. She often rubbed her earlobe with longing.

At first, the absence of the kind inner voice her Life-Band provided had disoriented her. She had never felt so alone, even when her mother died. But these days Eden enjoyed thinking for herself.

Kevon had relinquished his standard wristband with quiet dignity. He was braver, or more accepting, than she. Of course, far from home and dependent on these strangers for his survival, what choice had he had?

"Kevon is right," Eden said, coming to stand between him and Bramford. She aimed a firm look at Bramford. "You took it. He didn't do anything wrong."

"Is the FFP coming?" Kevon asked, his voice cracking with fear. "Please, don't let them take me."

Eden patted his shoulder. "Don't worry. No one's taking you away. You're family now."

Bramford grunted. Obviously, he didn't consider Kevon to be part of *his* family.

"If I could adapt," Kevon said eagerly, "I'd be safe."

"Forget it," Bramford hissed.

"But really," Eden said, "wouldn't it be for the best?"

"It's out of the question. Only you and Logan will adapt—no one else. We must be the only jaguar people, if war is to end." At her look of dismay, his voice softened. "Eden, you

of all people must realize that whoever holds the technology will use it to destroy others. I won't be responsible for the death of millions."

"But what about the Pearls? They'll die unless they adapt. You know they can't withstand The Heat."

"And they will die sooner if they get a hold of the technology. War will be inevitable, a war the Pearls cannot win. When peace reigns on Earth then, and only then, the technology can be shared. For now, we must keep it to ourselves, or we will also die, and this land with us. We're Earth's last hope, you and I."

Just as her father had dreamed: hybrid humans forming new colonies and taking back the land. Eden and Bramford would be the first pair like Adam and Eve.

Her voice quivered with hope. "Do you really think it's possible—peace?"

"Anything is possible," Bramford replied. "Look at me."

Her gaze passed with regret to Kevon. "Still, all that work, it seems a crime not to share it."

"Kevon hasn't proven his loyalty."

"Give him time, please," Eden said.

Bramford looked thoughtful. At least he didn't refuse, which she took as a small step.

"What about the Huaorani?" she added. "Do they want to adapt?"

"They believe that only the snake god, Coatlicue, has the right to turn them into animals when they die. And as long as they have the healing plant, they're fine."

Medicine from the miraculous plant had snatched Eden's father from the edge of death, and so she had named it in his

honor, Newman's Cure. A veritable fountain of youth, it sustained the Indians against The Heat and disease.

Eden imagined how Newman's Cure could also save the Pearls. "If only we could somehow send the plant back to the tunnels, the Pearls might survive."

"It wouldn't grow in that climate," Bramford countered. "Besides, if the world learns of its healing power this place will be destroyed, just like the rest of the planet. Above all, that must never happen. We owe it to Mother Earth to safeguard her last remaining oasis."

"True."

If only Bramford had known about the plant earlier, he might have used it to help Logan resist The Heat, and none of this would have happened. The Huaorani were in their own way as closed-mouthed as he.

"Let the world take its own course," he said. "It has nothing to do with us anymore. As long as we stay here."

Seeing the need behind Bramford's steely eyes, Eden told herself to close the door on the past once and for all. *Forget about the Pearls. Be happy.*

"But when will I adapt?" she asked once more.

He flicked a wary look at the warrior duo. "We'll discuss it when we reach our destination."

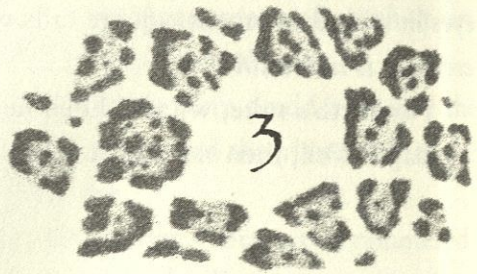
She started with a terrible realization. "We're going with them?"

"That's the plan." Then, like a shadow passing in a blink, he flew towards the lab.

A flock of mealy parrots, *Amazona farinosa*, chatted loudly in the trees above. Eden imagined the sociable green birds trading gossip about her plight, their maroon-colored

eyes lit with excitement, square tails wagging: *The odd white creature is in trouble.*

For Earth's sake, what if Eden never had another chance to adapt? Well, then she might as well be dead.



3

EDEN BELIEVED that Bramford had her best interests at heart, but he was hiding something from her. And she was tired of being treated like, well, like a Pearl, weak and dependent. She wanted to know what he knew—wasn't that how couples acted?

Hurrying after him, Eden rounded an imperious stand of giant bird of paradise plants and saw the makeshift laboratory that held the secret to mankind's salvation. The small wooden building stood like an island encircled by the teeming jungle. Glancing over her shoulder, she started at the sight of the jaguar warriors quietly following close behind. They must be looking for Bramford, Eden decided.

She burst through the open doorway to the lab, relieved when the furry duo waited outside. Although the single room fell far below the gleaming standard of Resources for Environmental Adaptation, Bramford's lab in the tunnels, her father had managed to create a decent if crude working environment. Soft amber light filtered through solar panels in the ceiling, relics from the twenty-first century that bathed the old-fashioned computers and wooden desks in a warm glow.

Eden looked with longing at the rustic test bed that sat

directly under the glass ceiling. Her father had rigged his antiquated machines to harness the power of the sun. By now she should have been strapped to the bed, terrified and ready to start her new life. But she couldn't think about that now.

Be happy. Just trust Bramford.

Her father bent over a handmade notebook, reading intently. As inventive as ever, even in this primitive land, he had made paper out of wood pulp and ink from a mixture of charcoal and clay. No one but Eden could decipher his chicken scrawl, though even she could not always grasp his meaning.

His glasses slowly slid down the bridge of his nose, which was beaded with perspiration. Fair like her, he had little tolerance for the intense tropical heat. Nevertheless, he appeared quite well since the life-sustaining plant, Newman's Cure, had saved him.

He did not pay attention to her arrival, nor did Bramford, who was busy unhooking the electronic equipment. The urgency in the air frightened Eden.

Her father tossed the notebook to the ground and took up another from a stack nearby. Bramford jerked around and snapped at him. "Don't leave anything behind!"

"What?" Her father looked up, blinking fast. As usual, he seemed to inhabit a world of his own, oblivious to the present reality. "Ah, yes," he added, "how careless of me."

He jumped from his seat, retrieved the discarded notebook, and tossed it with perfect aim into a basket on the floor, all in one fluid motion. Stunned by his agility, Eden laughed nervously. For most of her life she had thought of her

father as a big brain on a skinny stick, an aged thirty-nine-year-old genius who had little awareness of his body. Now he moved like a much younger man. She wondered what had caused the extraordinary change in him.

Her father pushed up his eyeglasses and gave her a puzzled look, as if he were trying to place her. "Daught?"

After repeated efforts, Eden had stopped asking him to drop the irritating nickname that made her feel like a scientific classification, genus *Daughter.*

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

Didn't anyone remember? "I was supposed to adapt today," she answered miserably.

"Indeed." He looked right through Eden with the intense but vacant expression she recognized as his inventor's mode. If he had been wearing his Life-Band, it would have produced Holo-Images in the air that mirrored his thoughts, but now she had no idea what he was thinking.

"Father?" she prompted him.

"When you add time to the equation," he began, "the results will change—"

"Is that everything, Doctor?" Bramford interrupted.

Her father dropped the last notebook into the basket without a break in his dialogue. "Of course other factors may also increase or diminish the outcome. Without the benefit of perfect conditions that can be replicated over and over, there is no way to guarantee a repetition of the precise equation."

Panic bloomed in Eden's chest like bacteria in a Petri dish. "Are you saying the adaptation process has changed?"

He waved off her concern. "I'm simply investigating a new hypothesis for a unified field of time."

Eden watched Bramford carry the basket and equipment outside, her eyes trailing down his broad back to his slim hips. Her entire happiness depended on becoming his mate. She shuddered to think of the many ways in which her adaptation could go wrong.

For one thing, she might only reach stage one, according to the original plan, which would leave her far less adapted than Bramford. That would never work. The brute would kill her if they tried to mate.

Even worse, Eden could end up with more prominent features of the other animal donors that contributed to her father's novel DNA cocktail. She cringed at the idea of a freakish creature with the spindly, knotted legs of a harpy eagle and a snake-like torso or head. Sweet Earth, she wanted to be beautiful like Bramford, a matched pair.

And then another sick thought punched her in the gut: what if she ended up with a cat's tail? She wiped away the perspiration from her brow.

Bramford swept back inside. "Ready, Doctor?"

Her father nodded, though his distracted air suggested the opposite.

"Then let's go."

Eden sidled up to her father, desperate for reassurance. "Can you repeat the experiment exactly?"

"Wait and see," he answered.

Eden had come to admire his simple motto, but she didn't want to wait, not at all. And yet Bramford was calling, the enemy closing in.

"Come," she said, leading her father out the door behind Bramford.

The jaguar warriors snapped to attention at their approach.

"Why, they have a *macuahuitl!*" her father said, rushing forward.

The men aimed their deadly swords at him and cried out. Her father did not seem to register the danger. His blue-gray eyes gleamed with excitement.

"No!" Bramford's arm shot out to stop him, nearly knocking him down. He steadied her father's wobbly stance. "Easy, now."

"What? What?" Her father pointed at the warrior's swords. "Don't you realize what a rare archeological find the *macuahuitl* is?"

In response, the Aztecs jabbed the air with the blunt end of their weapons and spoke in a soft, guttural language that Eden didn't recognize.

Bramford spoke as if to calm a rambunctious child. "Doctor, they will cut you dead if you get near them."

"But do you understand the Aztec language, Nahuatl?"

"I understand menace. These soldiers are not interested in aiding your research."

"For Earth's sake, pay attention, Father," Eden said.

He gave her a sheepish look. "You see, Daught, the last *macuahuitl* was destroyed in the nineteenth century. No doubt this tribe escaped the Spanish conquistadors centuries ago and has survived The Heat thanks to the very same plant that saved my life."

"A lot of good it did you if you're going to run into swords." One day, Eden feared, his curiosity might kill him.

How would she ever keep the solemn promise she had made at her mother's deathbed to look after him?

Bramford signaled to the warriors to wait then leapt high into the trees, carrying a passel of clunky lab equipment as if it were featherweight. At least he would keep it safe somewhere, Eden hoped.

The Aztecs relaxed their aggressive stance and, as they looked at Eden, bowed their heads. This time she had not imagined their respect. But what on Good Earth had she done to earn it?

Her father commented on their reactions. "It seems they revere you."

Eden scoffed. "That's ridiculous. I'm nothing to them."

"On the contrary. Jaguar warriors bow to few—the number of men they've captured or killed earns their rank. Perhaps as Bramford's future mate you have risen to the realm of the gods."

"Me, a goddess?" The idea was laughable. "I don't think so." Even if she adapted—and she must—she would simply be a Jaguar Girl. Unlike Bramford, no earth-shaking prophecy would fall on her shoulders.

"I suppose it's nothing to worry about," Eden added.

"Everything in the Aztecs' lives revolved around the gods," her father said, brimming with enthusiasm. "Their sacred calendar, the *tonalpohualli,* divided the year into twenty weeks, one week for each god. This balancing act guaranteed peace among the deities. Without spiritual balance, the Aztecs feared a great war would end the world."

Eden reflected on the ruin of Earth that had forced the

majority of mankind to live underground in order to avoid extreme solar radiation. "Seems like things can't get much worse," she said.

Her father chuckled. "We're still here, aren't we? One can only assume the worst is still to come."

"For Earth's sake, how can be so cheerful?"

He looked puzzled. "How can I not?"

No matter how dire the situation, her father always found some intriguing aspect. Like Bramford, however, he had kept some of his discoveries to himself. Eden hated being kept in the dark: you never knew what piece of information might save you.

"Did you study the Aztec language?" she asked, too sharply.

"Naturally," he replied. "Though it was difficult to piece together."

So much digital information had been lost in the Great Meltdown that the Uni-Gov's scribes had combed through the scant number of books to reconstruct world history. Even so, rumors abounded that the writing—or rewriting—of history contained many lies. Naturally, stories slanted in favor of the Coals.

"Father, don't you think I should known about your secret studies? I was your lead researcher, after all."

"Secret?" he said. "Yes, well, since I alone knew of my research, technically you could call it a secret." His tone shifted once more to enthusiasm—a convenient trick for brushing aside her concerns.

"You see," her father went on, "the *tonalpohualli* calendar had two concentric circles. One contained the numbers one to thirteen, the number of days in their week. The second circle depicted a symbol for each of the twenty gods. At the end of one week, the next deity was served, until after two hundred and sixty days each of them had been properly worshipped. A marvel of organization, the Aztec gods covered a wide range of elements—rain, wind, water, even love."

Bramford leapt back to the ground with a growl, his luminous eyes on Eden. Her heart hammered, her knees felt weak. How much longer could she wait for him?

"Ready?" he said.

Eden nodded, her voice caught in her throat.

He strode ahead towards the huts. "Let's go."

Eden and her father struggled to keep pace, shadowed by their warrior escorts. Tracing the sway of Bramford's muscular back, she felt a quiver in her belly. Now, he was heavenly. She simply wanted to worship him.

"Which god does Bramford represent?" Eden asked.

"For example," her father said, "the image of a jaguar, called Ocelotl, represented the god of sorcery on the calendar. Therefore, the Jaguar Man represents the god of sorcery who governs war and destruction.

That couldn't be right. "Bramford represents war? I thought they admired him."

"War was necessary to expand the Aztec empire. And of course it weeds out the weak from the strong—evolution's basic premise." Her father's voice spiked with great interest. "The god of sorcery, called Tezcatlipoca—"

At that, the warriors threatened him again with warning

shouts. Eden caught the names of the god of sorcery and the jaguar, Ocelotl. But her blood ran cold at the venomous look in the men's eyes.

"He's sorry, he meant no offense," she said, adding a timid smile. To her astonishment, the men's fierce expressions softened in apology.

"Hurry," Bramford said, urging everyone on.

"What was that all about?" Eden whispered to her father. "You'd think they hated the god of sorcery...or the Jaguar Man."

He stared ahead with that distracted look, and his hesitation increased her growing unease.

"What is it?" she said.

"*Tez*—" Her father caught himself this time. "Because mankind has worshiped war to an extreme, the god of sorcery became the most powerful of the gods. As I said, the Aztecs believed this spiritual imbalance would bring about a war to end the world."

"Wait, to end their world, or the entire world?"

"Anything is possible. All we can do is wait and see."

"But I can't wait to adapt."

As they entered the clearing, Eden's stomach clenched at the sight of Kevon and her Huaorani friends exiting the gate. A company of parrots burst from the trees in a flurry of greens and yellows, followed by a tumultuous cloud of sparrows. Small hidden animals scurried loudly through the underbrush. Something terrible was coming.

Eden stayed rooted to the spot, wishing she could stop the exodus.

Bramford came beside her and took her hand. "Come," he said gently.

"What's your plan?" she asked.

"Who says I have a plan? I'm just following orders."

If she could learn to be brave, why couldn't he learn to share? Her temper flared, and she called him by the Spanish name for the Jaguar Man. "Come on, *Tigre*, can't you tell me what you see in the future?"

His eyes bulleted hers, sending her into that trance-like state in which the rest of the world disappeared, along with the scolding words she intended to heap onto him.

"What do I see?" His mood turned playful as he imitated the dreamy voice of a soothsayer. "I see a ferocious she-cat raking her nails down my back. My mate is beautiful and free. Oh, the things I see would make you scream with delight."

Sometimes Eden didn't know whether to slap him or kiss him. She mumbled, "Men keep things to themselves; that's why we have wars."

Bramford simply grunted and, in one fast swoop, settled her onto his shoulders. Clenching her thighs around him, a familiar flood of pleasurable sensations coursed through Eden, easing her anxiety.

The wind blew in her face as he ran towards the gate. Too soon, they exited the compound, and she saw Kevon by the edge of the forest, fiddling with a bag of supplies. He glanced up at her with tearful eyes, his dimpled chin quivering.

"Don't worry, Brother," she said, surprised to find herself echoing Bramford's empty promises. "It'll be all right."

If only she believed that.

Kevon joined the Huaorani who began to trudge up the mountain with their meager belongings. Eden regretted that when she had fallen under the spell of her ex-boyfriend and ruined Bramford's well-laid plans, she had unwittingly exposed these dear people to danger. When she was a she-cat she would make it up to them.

"We're coming back, aren't we, Bramford?" she said, as they followed the group.

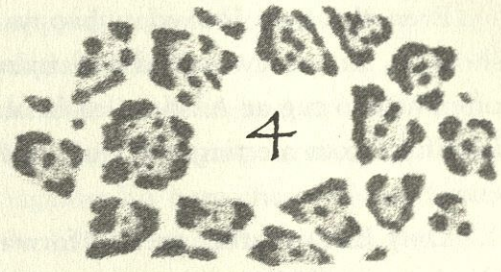
"What did I tell you?"

"Trust you?"

She felt his head nod under her hands.

"Okay," she murmured.

But Eden could not shake off the sinking feeling that things would never be as good again. She took one last look over her shoulder at the place she called home before the thick jungle sealed off her view. As she looked ahead, Jaguar Paw caught her eye and beamed a chilling, triumphant look.



4

FROM HER PERCH on Bramford's shoulders, Eden surveyed the small caravan ahead as it wended its way through the rainforest in somber silence: a ragtag group of homeless people guided by Jaguar Paw and Scroll Jaguar, a pair of costumed freaks. Just like on her first trek through the forest over a month ago, she soon lost her bearings and had no idea what the future held.

The old woods, tangled with heavy vines, presented an impenetrable tapestry of multi-hued greens. Redolent of dirt and rotting leaves, the steamy air weighed heavily on Eden. The monotonous thwacking of Lorenzo's and Charlie's machetes sounded like the beat of heavy drums and mirrored her unrelenting anxiety. Each time the men carved out a small opening the steamy green tunnel sprang closed as soon as the group passed until, after several hours, she felt suffocated.

And with each passing mile, Eden felt her chance to adapt move farther out of reach.

The forbidding surroundings took a toll on the others too. Strapped to Lucy's hip, Carlito cried softly. María shepherded her daughters and Logan, who sought Bramford's reassuring glance whenever the forest erupted in a crazy cacophony of bird calls, which occurred every few seconds.

Even the pets looked unhappy. Perched on Carmen's shoulder, the macaw ruffled its feathers in annoyance. Kevon often had to tug at Austin's leash; at least the dog's muzzle kept him from alerting any would-be trackers to their presence.

Only Eden's father pressed forward with unflagging enthusiasm, scribbling notes in a small booklet, gathering cuttings of leaves or eggs. Despite the gradual incline and sweltering heat, which would have fatigued even a younger man, he maintained a perky freshness that puzzled her. Watching him nibble curiously at an egg-shaped leaf from a white trillium plant, Eden wondered if he was performing any experiments on himself.

She pinched her throbbing fingers against her temples just as Bramford rubbed his hands up her bare legs. As usual, he seemed to sense her mood. She was learning to interpret his animal sounds. His soft purr meant: *I'm here with you.*

"Let's take a break," he called to the others.

As the jaguar group came to a stop, Bramford carried her away into the thick shadows. Now his hands pressed into her thighs like hot irons, communicating his desire. Eden rubbed her legs up and down his torso until he groaned. Like moths to a flame, her hands slid towards his mouth. His warm, rough tongue licked her fingers, giving her a crazy jolt.

From high in the upper canopy, a three-wattled bellbird, *Procnias tricarunculata,* made loud metallic *bong* sounds, which mirrored Eden's growing need. As she leaned against the back of Bramford's thick neck, he reached for her hips. With a heavy groan he held her tight against him, rolling

her fast and hard. A gush of pleasure, like velvet heat, shot through her, leaving her lightheaded.

Bramford swung Eden into his arms and carried her towards a water hole. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pressed her breasts against his bare chest. Through the thin cotton of her top she felt his warmth, intoxicating and inviting.

As he took possession of a log at the edge of the pond, a solitary blue poison dart frog, *Dendrobates azureus,* defended its territory with a soft trill. Its sapphire color might gleam like a treasure, but this tiny amphibian packed enough venom to kill ten men. At El Tigre's raspy grunt, it simply hopped away.

Bramford sat Eden on his lap, straddling him. The hot light in his eyes reached deep inside her. "I want you," he said with a catch in his voice.

If only they were already a matched pair.

"Oh, Ronson," she said. "You know we can't."

He swallowed hard. "I know. But we may not be alone again for a while."

Before Eden could ask why, his ravenous mouth found hers in a mad crush. Their eager tongues entwined like tango dancers. Bramford slid onto the damp ground, drawing her on top of his taut body.

He brushed his hands under her short dress, molding his hot hands to her curves. Eden's heart hammered high in her chest, her breath came shallow and fast. Nuzzling her neck, Bramford drew the sharp points of his teeth against her skin. She let out a small yelp that he answered with an excited growl.

He gently rolled her underneath him, blocking off the world around her. His earthy scent and insistent purr pushed her to the edge of desire.

"I love you," Eden whispered.

Instead of the amorous words she longed to hear, a strange voice struck the air. Bramford tensed above her. In a flash, he sprang to his feet.

Eden scrambled to her knees, stopped short by the sight of four Aztec warriors who stepped out of the forest. These men wore eagle costumes, thick white feathers framing tense brown faces. Dark eyes gleamed like hungry predators that had cornered their prey—staring at her!

For some inexplicable reason, Eden sensed a vortex of unimaginable forces gathering around her. But that was crazy—a Pearl, like her?

"Bramford—?"

He appeared calm as he helped her to her feet. "Time to go."

When he had first adapted she had seen him single-handedly defeat a half dozen FFP soldiers back in the tunnels. Now he acted like a docile kitten.

"Why should you obey them?" she asked with a pique of temper.

"Because there is a natural order to things," Bramford replied.

"What things?"

"For one thing, you must adapt before we mate."

"You're using that as a weapon against me, aren't you?"

"I'm doing what's best for you, for us. Trust me?"

"Fine."

Eden took his hand, and as they headed back to their group, the eagle warriors followed behind. And then she understood that they were being watched.

"Do you trust them, Bramford?" she whispered.

He shrugged. "Their tribe saved our lives once, didn't they?"

"True." But for the first time, Eden considered that these people might have a vested interest in helping them. "What do they want from us?"

"To take the next step," Bramford said in a faraway voice. "The situation is beyond us. It's been a long time coming, in fact."

"What on Holy Earth are you talking about?"

"We have no choice but to go where life leads us. The sooner you learn that, Eden, the easier things will be for you."

Her voice spiked with fear. "Are you saying I won't adapt?"

A small smile carved his handsome face. "Oh, you'll adapt."

At the moment, the possibility seemed far away. But Eden accepted it on good faith until, like the turning of a wheel, sadness came into Bramford's eyes, and he added, "That's ordained. You must be my mate."

"Must be? Because there's no one else to choose?"

"Choose? You're not listening. Do you think what happened—the fire at REA, my advanced adaptation, even coming here—was accidental? There's a plan, and whether we like it or not, we're part of it."

His mixed messages filled Eden with confidence in the future and, alternately, frightened her. If he was protecting her

from a dangerous truth, she was no longer sure she wanted to hear it.

"When you took your shaman's flight, did you see the whole plan?" she asked. "I'd feel better knowing that at least you understand what's happening."

"It isn't like that." Bramford looked surprised, as if he suddenly realized that she didn't grasp something fundamental. He pointed to a regal palm. "The future is like this tree. If you cut it straight, you see a certain pattern. Cut it against the grain, and you see something completely different. As many patterns exist as ways to cut it. Do you understand?"

Try as Eden might, his explanation hovered out of reach, as murky as the dark recesses under the clumps of trees.

A note of desperation rose in her voice. "But how do you know which way to 'cut' it? I mean, how does a shaman see the future if there are so many options?"

"I see what is. What the most likely scenario will be if events continue under the present conditions."

"Huh?" They might as well speak different languages. His weary sigh suggested that his frustration equaled hers.

"Look," Bramford said after a moment. "Do you really think you would want to know the future?"

"Absolutely!"

He laughed, and the tension between them popped like a soft bubble. "My eager Eden, always grasping at life." Then he turned serious once more. "Trust me, you wouldn't enjoy the present if you always new what lay around the corner."

"For Earth's sake, are hiding something from me?"

"I'm simply saying that Mother Earth wisely gave us blinders."

He would never convince her on that score. As a Pearl, the present had always held great dangers. Knowing the future could only protect her.

Eden shook her head. "If I knew how and when I would adapt, I could relax now."

Bramford spoke carefully, searching for his words. "What you don't understand is that the future is constantly changing, even now. Things don't always turn out as we expect. If you anticipate a specific outcome, you might miss an even better opportunity."

"Then what am I supposed to do?"

"Accept that you're where you're supposed to be, that it's for the greater good, and you'll be fine."

What did Eden care about the greater good? She didn't want to save the world, only her slice of happiness, nothing more. She would risk her life to adapt—not for the sake of humanity, but for him. If only Bramford would say, "I want you to adapt because I love you and I can't live without you!"

"Why can't things just be simple?" Eden said with a sigh.

Again, Bramford looked surprised, and explained, "Because nothing is set. Our actions count. We can change the course of the future with a single thought or action."

"Oh." For a moment Eden thought she finally grasped the truth; but it shimmered like a mirage and disappeared. She brushed away a long vine that tangled in her hair and blinked at Bramford. "If the situations changes, how do you know you're on the right path?"

He smiled with deep kindness. "That's what I'm telling you. When you trust that you're part of something larger, you simply know what to do."

Love him. That was all Eden knew. And that would have been enough to satisfy her, if he hadn't added an alarming note.

"I didn't ask for this job, but I've accepted my destiny. What will be will be. One man can't turn the tide of history, not even El Tigre."

"How do you handle it, Bramford?"

"Who says I do?"

His tender gaze came to rest on Eden, and for one startling moment he let her in. Behind the philosophical façade and iron will she saw his pain, and it moved her. Good Earth, she loved him more than she could bear.

From the recesses of her memory she recalled romantic Holo-Images that she had watched on the World Band: A woman wearing a billowing white dress stands beside a man in a fine set of clothing under an arch laden with frothy roses. The bride and groom, as they were called, exchange matching rings, their faces aglow with happiness.

Typically, Eden's starry-eyed mother had been enamored with such Old World nonsense.

—One day, Daughter, I hope you'll find the man of your dreams. Then you'll understand the desire to marry, the way people did in the Old World, when love was not a joke, but something to live for.

At best, Eden had hoped that someone with better genetics than hers would pick up her mating option so that she would be allowed to live past eighteen. The contract to produce one offspring had nothing to do with romance. Usually, mated couples only lived together until they had a child. Her parents had been an exception—an embarrassment, really.

Now, with a flash of joy, Eden understood what her mother had meant. More than simply being Bramford's mate, she wanted to be his wife. If she had to submit to a mysterious destiny, then she wanted an old-fashioned insurance policy: a marriage to stamp the future with a definite pattern.

"Marry me," Eden said urgently.

Bramford looked dumbfounded. "What?"

"I want to get married. A lifelong commitment between us." Like a weed waiting to sprout, her fear popped into her mind, and the words tumbled out. "I want to know you really want me, and not just because I'll be the only spotted girl around."

He laughed, full-throated and free. She gave him a baleful stare.

"You're not kidding, are you?" he said.

Eden refused to beg.

"Hmmm." Bramford stared into space, with that faraway expression that suggested he could transcend space and time. She wondered if he consulted with greater beings in a superior realm, and what advice they would dispense.

Marry the Pearl?

His eyes shifted back and forth, as if weighing the consequences. Eden held her breath. What would she do if he refused?

At last Bramford turned his attention to her. A wicked gleam danced in his golden-green eyes. "Does that mean we'll have a honeymoon?"

Her stomach quivered, and she grinned. "As soon as I adapt."

He laughed again.

"Well?" she said.

"It won't make any difference, but if that's what you want, I'll marry you, Eden."

A troop of golden lion tamarins, *Leontopithecus rosalia,* scampered along the byways of interconnecting trees. Their bright orange manes flashed through the shadows like a raging fire. Their fervent calls echoed her heart's cry.

Married! She would be Mrs. Ronson Bramford.

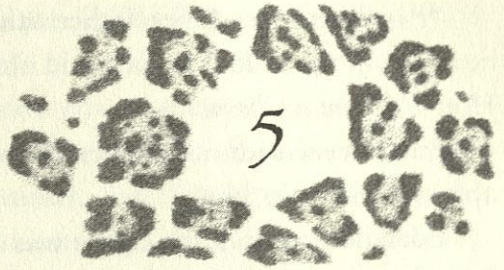
It was ridiculous, really. He was right: a wedding made no difference; it was a dead institution. They loved each other, with or without it.

That's what he meant, right?

In the distance, a familiar susurrus filtered through the thinning foliage. Eden recognized the sound of a waterfall with a start: Heaven's Gate, the only place in the world where the healing plant, Newman's Cure, grew. Recalling two previous visits here with Bramford, she realized that their guides had led them on a circuitous path, perhaps to throw off any trackers.

The thunderous roar grew louder as they drew near the edge of the forest. A wide beam of light fell through an opening in the trees, trapping dust motes and tiny yellow butterflies in its translucent shaft. A light breeze stirred the misty air and raised gooseflesh on Eden's arms. And suddenly, there it was, the magnificent roaring fall that took her breath away.

As Eden and Bramford walked onto the rocky cliffs, she breathed a sigh of relief. The past would never find them in this hidden pocket of Earth. She'd bet her life on it.



5

EDEN GRIPPED Bramford's hand as they inched sideways along the narrow, slippery stones under the lip of the waterfall. Her back slid against the lichen-covered mountain wall. An arm's length ahead, the water roared like an angry monster, wetting her clothes and the footpath with a thick spray.

Even more daunting than the perilous drop to the pool below, the Aztecs kept Eden and her group sandwiched between them, with Jaguar Paw and Scroll Jaguar at the lead and the eagle soldiers bringing up the rear. There was no turning back.

By the time they crossed to the other side, the sun had reached its zenith, and drove sharp spikes of light through a grove of kapok trees, *Ceiba pentandra*, creating spotlights on a carpet of pinkish bell-shaped flowers. Those grand patriarchs of the forest provided a respite from the sound of the waterfall and the world beyond.

In the sudden hush, a big cat's growl hit the air—a real one. The children screamed, while the warriors flashed their weapons. Bramford and Eden's father simply expressed their curiosity, though for different reasons.

"Panthera onca," her father said. "I never thought I'd hear one in the wild." Eden could almost hear him thinking, *How I'd love to dissect it.*

Bittersweet sadness tempered Bramford's voice. "Probably the last of its kind."

Eden decided that the jaguar was a good omen—how had Bramford put it—that showed they were where they were supposed to be.

Be happy, Eden.

The group climbed uphill onto a wide plateau, and one by one stopped to take in the stunning vista. Steep impenetrable cliffs fell thousands of feet to the valley below where the Amazon River shimmered like a silver ribbon on a patchwork quilt of browns and greens. No wonder modern man had never discovered this oasis or the powerful healing plant that grew here.

Eden's father immediately noticed it. "Newman's Cure!" he exclaimed, hurrying towards the hardscrabble at the rocky scree. Discovering the drab gray plant that had saved his life must have been like meeting an old friend. Apparently their guides did not appreciate his special moment, because they drew their swords and issued a clear command to stop.

Bramford intercepted him. "This is sacred ground, Doctor."

"Yes, but—"

He fell silent at the sound of a loud drumbeat. Turning to face the hillside behind them, Eden and her company saw a pair of drummers appear at the top of the ridge. The Aztec musicians stood upon stone steps that wound down the hill past a series of old walls.. Pretty drapes of magenta bougainvillea could not hide the eerie feeling that emanated from those ramparts.

As the primitive tattoo rose to a fast beat, an old man stepped beside the drummers. He wore a dark cape around his shoulders, and underneath, only a loincloth. The simplicity of his attire did not undermine the majesty of his being. He seemed as ancient as time, and yet full of vigor. Another example of what Newman's Cure could do, Eden suspected.

Her father nearly levitated with excitement. "I believe he's a priest," he said. "The cape is called..." He riffled through his notebook. "Yes, a *tilma*."

"He's creepy," Eden said.

At that, the priest narrowed his dark eyes at her, studying her with keen interest. Her breath caught in her chest, her limbs froze. How long did the strange man hold her in the prison of his gaze, mere seconds or several hours? Time stretched into a dark abyss, carrying her along with it.

The priest gave her a satisfied smile then disappeared over the ridge, breaking the spell he had cast upon her. Once more, the warriors herded Eden and the others onward. In a daze she walked beside Bramford, huddling as close as possible on the uneven steps. She had probably imagined the weird incident; the lack of sleep and stress of leaving camp had affected her.

Approaching the stone terraces, Eden came to a halt with a loud gasp. Now she understood the reason for the eerie feeling: row after row of weathered human skulls were stuck onto pikes in the ground. The sad voices of the dead seemed to hover in the shadows, their stories lost forever. With a sinking feeling, she recalled the Aztec practice of offering sac-

rificial victims to appease the gods. Nearby stone structures must have served as prisons.

Eden never should have come here; she knew that now. Everything pointed to disaster.

Her Indian friends moved robotically past her, as if pulled uphill like iron filings to a magnet. Didn't they feel the evil in the air, its tentacles reaching to suck them into an ink-black hole? As she looked in panic at Bramford, the wariness in his eyes told her he felt it too. And yet he continued to follow his shamanic path on blind faith.

All at once, Eden understood what a tightrope they walked. If a single thought or action could change the future, how narrow a margin of safety did they have?

"Come," Bramford said, reaching for her hand.

"Not going," she stammered.

He pleaded his case with only a tender look. *Trust me.*

What choice did Eden have? She would just have to think more positively. *Be really happy?*

"Fine," she said.

They continued on in silence. And although Eden took her cue from Bramford's steady calm, she sensed they were traveling deeper into a labyrinth that would swallow them whole.

The rest of their group had stopped at the top of the ridge. Coming beside them, Eden saw a fourteenth century Aztec village spread over a lush landscape that glowed in the afternoon light. She almost laughed at the unexpected and wonderful sight.

Back in the tunnels, through the ordinary time-traveling effect of Holo-Images, she once had visited the vast ancient

Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan. This much smaller village had a similar layout. And though it had seen better days, the place still bustled with life, no doubt thanks to the precious plant that defied mortality.

On the west side of a typical central square stood a classical pyramid with twin steep staircases. Two temples pressed into a bank of clear sky, except the red one rose much higher than the crumbling blue one, the only nonsymmetrical detail on the pyramid.

Her father stared at the monument with what Eden could only describe as ecstasy. Never mind that they might be sacrificed there!

Small adobe brick buildings with peaked straw roofs spread out from the square along dirt roads. Other dwellings lay scattered around outlying farm plots. A series of interconnected canals flowed through the fields into a wide, shimmering lake. Impenetrable jungle rimmed the village on either side.

The girls' pet macaw sailed ahead like a colorful banner announcing their presence, as the group followed to the continued beat of the drums. Entering the main square, they saw at least a hundred swarthy Aztecs of all ages and various classes represented by different styles of dress, who had gathered there—either to welcome or kill the newcomers.

It could go either way. But Eden couldn't think about that now because she really needed to be happy.

The number of people hardly filled the stone-covered plaza, which must have been crowded at events long ago. Then Eden noticed the scant number of children and the strong resemblance between the populace. Cut off from the

rest of the world for centuries, they had inbred, weakening their gene pool. If this was the last Aztec tribe, it wasn't long for this world.

Near the bottom of the pyramid steps, several rows of warriors formed separate groups, according to their affiliation. Some were dressed like Jaguar Paw and Scroll Jaguar; others wore equally frightening eagle costumes; the rank-and-file displayed pigtails and stiff cotton tunics. The assortment of crude weapons reminded Eden of the illegal gangs in the tunnels: studded clubs, a wooden sword with sharp blades embedded into its sides, a two-sided ax, lots of daggers—some things never changed.

The citizenry also appeared fierce, even without weapons, and capable of great physical endurance. Upon closer inspection, however, Eden noted the look of desperation underlying their warlike nature. She could almost hear a communal sigh of relief—*at last*—surely, over the arrival of the long-awaited Jaguar Man.

Then why were they staring at her? It must be because she was the first female Pearl to land on their doorstep, she decided.

Eden's Huaorani friends formed a tight-knit group beside her and Bramford as they came to stand opposite the Aztec congregation. Logan, Carmen, and Etelvina held hands in a chain of solidarity; Kevon hovered over them protectively. Austin began a low, simmering growl.

As the drumming abruptly ended, an uncomfortable silence descended over the square. The locals looked to the top of the pyramid with anticipation as a large cloud of golden smoke appeared there.

Eden's heart raced. No wonder the Aztecs had built their temples so high: the better to intimidate. Of course she didn't believe in gods, and yet, the power that radiated from on high terrified her.

The Aztecs fell to their knees, their heads bowed, as the billowing, brilliant cloud began to roll down the steep staircase at a stately pace. Even her friends assumed the reverent posture—El Tigre, too! Eden began to question him when he pulled her down beside him.

"Shhh," he said.

The shimmering apparition came to a standstill when it reached the square. Long streams of hypnotic smoke reached for Eden with a lover's caress. Its resinous, citrus smell filled her head with delightful visions of fields of golden sunflowers, their faces raised to the sun, and vibrant meadows of happy orange poppies.

She heard a booming voice from somewhere nearby, maybe even in her head, though it seemed to be all around her. "I am Huitzilopochtli, the sun god," it said.

Was she seeing things too? Through the thinning wisps of smoke, a beautiful golden man appeared. Under the hot equatorial sun he shone so brightly he seemed to be on fire. It hurt just to look at him, and Eden averted her eyes.

She nudged her father, who knelt beside her. "I think he said he's the sun god?" she whispered.

Her father nodded, as if this were perfectly natural. "Most likely, astrological signs at his birth assured his appointment to that lofty station. He's a sort of avatar or representative of the invisible true deity, but powerful all the same."

"So he's not really a god?"

"Perception equals reality, Daught." He indicated the reverent crowd. "If they believe this is the sun god, then who are we to say otherwise? Don't you feel the force of his power?"

Like being stunned with a laser gun.

Eden had only glimpsed the break of dawn until Bramford forced her to this hidden jungle. Now she found herself virtually centuries earlier in time, facing someone who just might be related to that awesome celestial body.

Keeping her eyes just below the Huitzilopochtli's shining face, she snuck a furtive peek and saw that a golden paste covered his face. He wore a crown of green Quetzal feathers, a great jade necklace, and gem-laden bracelets. His breastplate shone like gold and glittered with mother-of-pearl and turquoise encrusted mirrors—the better to blind you with.

Two attendants with severe expressions that matched the austerity of their tunics stepped out from the smoke. They carried bowls carved like skulls—or were they real sacrificial heads—that served as incense burners. The pair drew sand from bags at their sides and extinguished the last puffs of sweet-smelling smoke. Without the veil of incense, the glow from Huitzilopochtli burned even brighter. How did he do that?

The austere priest who had appeared at Heaven's Gate approached Huitzilopochtli with reverence. He spread a plain cloth on the ground before the sun god then cast a handful of corn kernels onto it. Once more he pierced Eden with a look that left her reeling. Then, lifting his gaze to the heavens, he began to chant in a gravelly voice.

Eden glanced at her father, who took furious notes. Did he really find this deadly drama inspiring?

"What's he saying?" she asked.

"In my estimation, he's the soothsayer or the astrologer, maybe both," he said excitedly. "I expect he will predict the future from the pattern of the corn."

"From corn?"

As the chant ended, the Aztec people leaned forward with quizzical expressions, and Eden followed suit. The astrologer studied the corn kernels for several minutes in complete silence. At last he whispered to the sun god, who beamed his gaze at Eden with a blast of scorching heat. Whoever Huitzilopochtli was—man or god—he definitely wasn't normal.

And here he came towards her! Sweat beaded on Eden's brow. Had the temperature spiked with his approach?

Her jittery glance shifted around the square as she calculated the odds of an escape. She clutched at Bramford's arm, imagining him scooping her onto his shoulders and running like the wind. They might make it, but she could never leave her friends and father behind.

That was the problem with attachment. When you cared for someone, you tied your fate to that person's. Before, Eden had kept her heart apart like a stone in a cool, dark cave. She had not needed anyone's affection, and had offered none. But now her loved ones affected her as surely as the moon moved the ocean tide.

But that's better than being lonely and unloved, right?

As usual Bramford seemed to read her mind. "Stay calm," he murmured.

Easy for El Tigre to say. But she was *cowode,* or inhuman. In other words fit to kill.

Lowering her gaze, Eden shuddered as Huitzilopochtli's bronzed legs stopped in front of her. She stared in awe at the beautiful turquoise ornaments on his exquisite sandals.

The sun god issued a short command that struck the air like a thunderbolt. Eden dared to watch as Bramford stood to meet him. Did she imagine the flash of fear in Huitzilopochtli's eyes as the two powers came face to face? Although Bramford stood his ground with apparent ease, she noted the flex of muscles and laser-like focus. He towered over the Aztec, at least double in size. His dark, mottled skin contrasted with Huitzilopochtli's luminous glow. One bite from Bramford's rock-solid jaw could snap his neck—divine or not.

Eden's heart skipped a beat when Huitzilopochtli suddenly pointed at her.

"Get up, slowly," Bramford said.

Slowly? As if she presented a threat? She stumbled to her feet, wondering what the sun god could possibly want with her.

At five feet six inches, Eden stood a head above the holy man, which seemed to catch him off guard. After the initial surprise, he seared her with his withering gaze. His hand shot out, and he yanked her hair. At her yelp, Huitzilopochtli looked satisfied and released his hold.

"He's testing you," Bramford said evenly.

Eden's voice quavered. "Testing for what?"

"Perhaps I can help," her father said and, rushing forward, added something in Nahuatl.

Wood and metal flashed in the air as the soldiers leveled their weapons at him. A warning cry went up, and the pounding of the drums began again. Any second, the troops might impale him on those nasty spears.

"Father, stop!" Eden cried.

"What? What?" He looked puzzled.

Bramford yanked him back into line then bowed his head at Huitzilopochtli in apology. The sun god grumbled with annoyance. But he hadn't gotten to the top of his game without recognizing a good opportunity. He beckoned Eden's father to his side.

"Go ahead," Bramford said. "I'm watching."

Her father obeyed and offered a dramatic bow before the deity. "Doctor David Newman, formerly of Resources for Environmental Adaptation, at your service."

Huitzilopochtli spoke slowly, and Eden's father nodded, as he explained to the others, "I will translate."

The sun god went on, indicating Eden and Bramford, back and forth. Then he swept his arm towards his subjects. Now he pointed at Eden's skirt and pantomimed tying it to Bramford's loincloth.

Her father chuckled to himself.

"Well?" Eden hissed.

"From what I understand, a great celebration will take place."

Bramford's skeptical tone echoed her fears. "Just what are we celebrating, Doctor?"

"I never connected it before. Indeed, the Old World custom fell out of use in our day." Caught up in his excitement, he jotted down notes as he rambled on. "Figuratively and literally, the tying of the knot joins two lives."

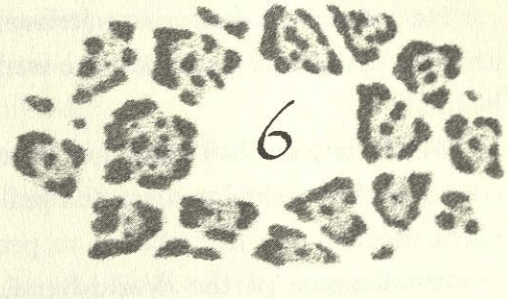
"Get to the point," Bramford said

The sun god, probably unaccustomed to such a talkative aide, added a note of impatience.

Eden had already figured it out. "Bramford and I will be married!" she exclaimed.

"Precisely, Daught."

The power of positive thinking had paid off after all: a real wedding in a picturesque Aztec village, while she waited to adapt! Things couldn't have gone better than if she had planned them herself.



6

THE CROWD PARTED as an elegant Aztec woman glided gracefully across the square. Her lightweight skirt fluttered in the wind as if it had wings to propel her. Her long dark hair hung in beribboned braids. Beside her, a lovely girl in similar dress walked with equal poise.

From their proud bearing, Eden guessed that they belonged to the noble class, probably mother and daughter. The girl must have been about fourteen or fifteen; her pert breasts jutted against her sleeveless saffron-colored blouse, which set off her warm brown skin.

The pair kept their gazes lowered, though the girl suddenly stole a look at Eden. The excitement in her soft brown eyes was both contagious and confusing. And as they stopped several feet in front of Eden, she had the feeling that they had rehearsed their parts, as if this were all a play, and she the main attraction.

Bramford's words came back to her with a sudden chill.

—The situation is beyond us. It's been a long time coming, in fact.

The "script" took an unwelcome turn when Jaguar Paw and Scroll Jaguar moved to stand on either side of Eden.

She appealed to her father. "What's happening?"

He looked up from his notebook and took in the new arrivals. "Ah, it appears that the wedding preparations have begun."

At Huitzilopochtli's brusque command, the jaguar warriors seized Eden by her arms and pulled her forward. Having spent most of her life relating to people through the anonymous distance of the World-Band, she had never grown accustomed to being touched. Her first kiss had been an unpromising virtual experience with her traitorous ex boyfriend, Jamal. Her mother had embraced her just once, right before she died. The only real touch Eden knew or wanted was Bramford's.

Kicking and screaming, she fought against her captors. "Let me go!"

"Eden, stop!" Bramford cried.

When she kicked Scroll in the groin, the soldiers looked bewildered and dropped their hold on her. Oddly, they didn't fight back. Eden ran to Bramford's side and clung to him.

"Please, don't let them take me," she said.

Bramford stroked the top of her head, but said nothing. A still hush floated over the crowd. The weighty silence frightened her.

Seeing the sun god in hurried conference with the astrologer, Eden considered a strange possibility: her little fit had not been scripted. Like an actor who improvises lines, she had thrown off the company.

Huitzilopochtli spoke to her father in a low, threatening voice like the rumble of thunder on the horizon.

Her father confirmed her hunch. "You've confused the

situation, Daught." He smiled with misplaced pride. "Apparently, a bride has never resisted protocol. The sun god asks if you wish to marry Bramford."

"Yes, but," Eden sounded braver than she felt, "tell him I'm not playing by their rules. No one touches me without my permission."

He complied, though his apologetic tone suggested he did not translate her words verbatim. Again, an uncomfortable silence reigned.

Then María quietly approached the deity and offered to help Eden. *"Yo le ayudo."*

Huitzilopochtli looked to Eden for agreement, and she turned to Bramford, who nodded his encouragement. Every second she hesitated put her friends in harm's way.

"Fine," she said.

The simple solution seemed to please the sun god. He gave her a slight wave—dismissed—and turned back up the stairs when a warlike sound blasted the air like a canon shot from atop the pyramid. Eden saw a sinister black shape looming over the edge.

A communal gasp rose up from the people. Like them, Eden found herself looking towards the sun god for reassurance. And he did not fail. Raising his arms over the crowd, like a priest in the Old World offering a benediction, he spread a wave of warmth that brought immediate calm. The ominous intruder disappeared.

Bramford released Eden with a heavy sigh, his face impassive. "Please, go with the women," he said.

"I'm trying," she said. "I really am."

"I know." He seemed to have more to say, and finally added, "This is more difficult for you than I realized. I never should have brought you here."

"Here, here?" She flung her arm over the square. "Or to the rainforest—it's a little late for that, isn't it?"

"I was selfish, forgive me."

Eden would not succumb to negative thoughts. Bramford had selfishly brought her here, despite the dangers, because he couldn't bear to be without her.

She forced a smile, then said, "There's nothing to forgive. We're in this together, right?"

"And as long as you trust me, you'll be fine."

His gleaming eyes locked onto her with a look of sweet-hot affection that shot straight to her heart. And like Aunt Emily, she accepted the bittersweet edge of love, no matter how vulnerable it made her.

I've got an arrow here;
Loving the hand that sent it,
I the dart revere.

Fell, they will say, in "skirmish"!
Vanquished, my soul will know,
By but a simple arrow
Sped by an archer's bow.

"I'll see you in the morning," Bramford said.

Eden nodded, her heart too full for words.

Drawing a deep breath, she began to walk with María, following the noblewoman and her daughter away from

the crowd. Behind Eden, at a respectful distance, came her warrior escorts. Carmen and Etelvina skipped along, bringing Logan with them. The macaw flew above them with a noisy squawk.

But Austin's whine arrested Eden's step. Over her shoulder, she spotted his pleading eyes.

Kevon patted the dog's head. "Don't worry, Sis," he said. "I'll take care of him."

"Thanks. I know I can count on you."

The dusty flagstones felt cool beneath Eden's bare feet, as she walked ahead, but her heart was as heavy as the ancient pavers. At the edge of the square they came to a dirt street lined with adobe houses. Nearly every other one lay in a crumbling heap, evidence of families long gone.

Turning down the street, Eden swore she heard Bramford call her name. She paused to scan the crowd that now milled around the square, but he was nowhere to be seen.

María tugged at her arm, telling her not to worry. "*No te preocupes.*"

Why did her friend's words reassure when Bramford's did not? For the first time, Eden considered that she "heard" him through some sort of inner filter that distorted his meaning. The possibility that she played more of a role in their misunderstandings than she knew stunned her.

At the far end of the street Eden saw the lake and the sun sliding to the west, trailing the last light of day over the water. The moon hung in the wings, waiting to take center stage. Would her life ever be secure, or was she doomed to a series of partings, like the sun and the moon, her heart's desire always out of reach?

Not far from the lakeshore, Eden's hostesses entered a small, sturdy home in good repair. With a weary sigh, Eden bent under the lintel of the low wooden door and followed. No more than eighty square feet, the dwelling was no bigger than her family's unit back in the tunnels. But its peaked straw roof and plastered stone floor gave it a cozy feel. The lime-washed walls looked very old, and beautiful despite their age.

To Eden's left lay a straw mattress with two deep impressions that she assumed belonged to mother and daughter. But what had happened to the man of the house? On the other side of the room, a tiny kitchen contained various metal implements and a glowing hearth.

The only light in the house filtered in through a back door, through which Eden saw the flickering shadows of curious neighbors. Bossy as ever, Carmen led her sister and Logan outside to play.

The Aztec noblewoman waited near the front door beside a small table that held a carved bowl and other simple objects. With a proud look, she pointed towards a brightly colored abstract painting on the wall above. Three slender light green shapes rose around a large yellow-and-white circle. Real flowers stuck to the wall around the image suggested that it depicted a flower.

The woman pointed to the painting and with a soft *sh* in the first syllable said, *"Xochipillli."*

At Eden's puzzled look she repeated the foreign sounds more slowly. Eden rolled the strange word off her tongue as best she could.

Now María repeated the name, and faithfully too, from

what Eden could tell. Her friend explained that this represented the god of love. *"El dios de amor."*

Beaming, the noblewoman's daughter showed Eden a doll crudely made of cornhusks that sat on the table. Its bright pastel colors matched those in the painting of Xochipilli.

Eden smiled. How lucky to be with people who worshipped love!

"Meztli," the lady of the house said, pointing to herself. Then she indicated her daughter. *"Yolotli."*

The girl's name reminded Eden of the ancient acronym YOLO, you only live once, which also evoked her new be-happy-now approach to life. If she privately dubbed the girl Yolo perhaps the nickname would remind Eden to let go of her fears.

With fierce pride and not a trace of sentimentality, Meztli gave another Nahuatl name as she pointed to a spear leaning against the wall.

"Una viuda," María said, explaining that the woman was widowed.

Now it was Eden's turn. She patted her chest. "Eden."

Disappointment washed over Yolo. She shook her head and gave the name of the love god, *"Xochipilli."*

Huh?

"E-den," she kindly repeated.

Yolo spoke sharply to her mother. The mother's reassuring tone reminded Eden of Bramford's repeated message. *Don't worry.*

The girl seemed to consider this for a moment then shook her head again. She pointed at Eden with a resolute expression. *"Xochipilli,"* she repeated.

Eden looked to María for an explanation and her friend studied the drawing on the wall. Eden's chest tightened as the seconds passed.

Surely these kind women meant no harm. Recalling the many flower bouquets at weddings, Eden decided that matrimony, and therefore brides, must fall under Xochipilli's dominion. Perhaps it was customary to call the bride by the name of love.

Eager to please her hostesses, Eden tried once more to pronounce the deity's name. Though it rolled in her mouth like marbles, her effort restored Yolo's good humor. They smiled at each other.

Yolo beckoned Eden out the back door, leading her down an outdoor passageway to a smaller dwelling. A blast of heat hit Eden as they entered. A burning fireplace dominated the tiny room, which only held a large wooden bucket of water.

A strange bathroom, Eden surmised, wondering at the need for such heat in a tropical climate.

Yolo threw a handful of small bean pods into the fire and soon an intoxicating scent filled the air. Eden combed through her encyclopedic knowledge of plants, but its identification eluded her.

Without warning, Yolo tugged at Eden's dirty white dress.

"Hey!" Eden cried, pulling away.

Yolo's face puckered. The Aztecs really didn't like improvisation, did they? Eden wondered if the poor girl would be punished for her failure. After all, Yolo only wanted her to take a bath.

"Okay," Eden muttered and, turning her back, slipped out of her clothes.

Hugging her arms around her body, Eden dipped her toe into the bucket, but Yolo reached out to stop her. Eden shyly glanced over her shoulder. The girl stood there—naked—and shaking her head!

What now?

Yolo gently moved Eden aside and picked up the bucket. As she sloshed water onto the fire-hot walls, a cloud of warm steam enveloped them. Oh, a steam bath, Eden realized.

Yolo began to hum in a voice as pure as a small brown plain wren's, *Thryothorus modestus*. Again visions of flowers appeared in Eden's mind. She did not question the heady feelings that rippled through her like the wind setting a field of daisies to dance. She smiled at Yolo while thinking of a rare brown flower, *Cosmos atrosanguineus*, which this sweet, unassuming girl brought to mind.

This time when Yolo touched her, Eden didn't flinch, but let out a long sigh. The girl stroked her hair, singing a plaintive tune. Her soft hands slid down Eden's back. The caress traveled the sides of her legs and back up again, leaving Eden awash in contentment.

Yolo turned Eden around to face her. The top of her head barely reached Eden's chin. Dark lashes framed velvety doe eyes that turned up to meet hers.

She smiled as her hands slid across Eden's damp chest, circling her breasts. Eden's breath caught there, her heart frighteningly still. Yolo kept on touching her, as if she really enjoyed it. As if Eden's white skin did not repulse her.

As she bent down her small light hands roamed to Eden's hips and thighs with a delicacy that made Eden shudder. She felt captive in the girl's embrace, happily so. Yolo rose up

through the cloud of steam that hung in the air and fixed her with a deep stare. Tracing the outline of Eden's heart with her fingertip, she said quietly, *"Yolotli."*

Despite her dreamy state, Eden caught her meaning. "Heart—your name means heart. No wonder you're so sweet."

An unbearable sadness colored Yolo's eyes. Maybe other girls teased her about her name. They could be so mean. Eden knew all about being unpopular, and determined to befriend this likable girl, starting with a proper introduction.

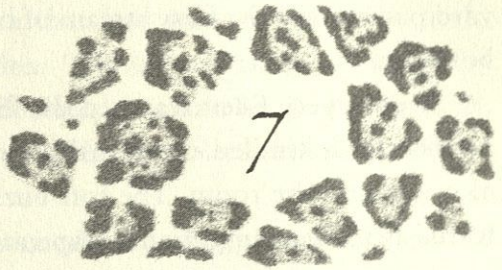
"Eden," she said, patting her chest once again.

The scented mist swirled between them like a genie let out of a bottle. Her new friend closed the gap, brushing her body against Eden's.

"Xochipilli," Yolo said, as insistent as before.

Eden shrugged. If this was what it was like to be the god—or in her case, the goddess—of love, why not play along?

"Fine," she said, giving in. "If you say so, I'm Xochipilli."



7

THE DEMANDING call of a cocoa woodcreeper, *Xiphorhynchus susurrans,* with its *kew-kew-kew,* pierced Eden's consciousness. She awoke, surprised to find someone spooned around her. Then she remembered Yolo, and the dramatic change in Eden's circumstances rushed back to her.

She had always longed for a sister, but having a girlfriend was the next best thing. And a dark-skinned girl, too—imagine that.

Nestling under the blanket, Eden thought of all the things she wanted to share with Yolo, if only they spoke the same language: her old life in the Caterpillar, the escape to the rainforest, and especially, the story of how she fell in love with Bramford. But if she and Yolo had trouble communicating now, how would Eden's adaptation affect their budding friendship?

She couldn't think about that now. She must try to be happy.

She heard María and the children rise from where they lay sleeping on the floor. Someone threw open the back door, and a sliver of rosy light cleaved the darkness. The bed rustled as Meztli rose. The scamper of small feet towards the

yard punctuated the busy stream of birdcalls and their neighbors' voices.

Sleepy-eyed, Eden watched the flickering shadows of the women who kindled the hearth. Soon the fire cast a waxy glow around the room. The soft buzz of female voices comforted her. How empty and desperate her life in the tunnels had been.

As Yolo began to stir, Eden reached for her, murmuring, "Just a few more minutes."

The girl sunk back into the mattress with a sigh, her soft breath warming Eden's shoulder blades.

See, simple gestures and tone of voice would get them through.

Yolo said something. *Good morning?*

"Hmmm," Eden concurred. It was good, no matter how much she missed Bramford. She savored the contented feeling in the same way she had relished the first uni-credits paid into her account when she started working at Bramford's lab. The sum hadn't amounted to much, a pittance really, but those credits had allowed her a few options. And so did friendship, which opened up Eden's world.

Maybe happiness relied on banking these simple moments of contentment and saving them up to protect against future despair. If Eden really let herself be happy, really accepted that this was where she was supposed to be, her happy state might compound, like money earning interest, and carry her over the rough patches ahead. So she practiced this new approach and tucked away the sweetness of the moment like a credit or an Old World coin in a change purse.

Soon an intoxicating roasted smell floated out from the

kitchen, the same aroma that had scented the steam bath. Finally the name hit Eden: *Theobroma cacao*—literally the food of the gods, or chocolate, as it had been known in the Old World. Even in the tunnels, chocolate retained a mythical aura.

Eden's father had assigned her to study the plant's genetic properties, hoping to use it as a stimulant for test patients. But the fabricated scent she had studied at the lab hardly prepared her for the actual one. They had abandoned the study when the search for a single cacao seed came to a dead end.

Dramatic climate changes had destroyed the delicate balance in which the cacao plant thrived—just eighteen degrees north and south of the equator—until the species had succumbed to infestations of pests and rot. In the late twenty-first century, an artificial substitute was introduced, but failed to fool anyone. Eden's pulse quickened at the possibility that this rare plant existed here.

"Chocolate?" she said, hopefully.

"Sí." María affirmed, since it sounded similar in Spanish. She gave the local name. *"Xocoatl."*

Wait till Father hears about this!

Eden tumbled out of bed and hurried across the room to investigate with Yolo in tow. Meztli happily demonstrated how to grind whitish calcified beans into a pile and mix in water and diced chilies. She poured the mixture back and forth in ceramic beakers, creating a dark drink with a large head of foam.

Smiling, she handed a mug to Eden. The cool drink tickled the back of Eden's throat. To her surprise, it was bitter. Of course, the Spanish conquistadores had never set foot in this

little pocket of paradise, so sugar had never been introduced here. This was the real thing, concocted this way since the 1400s!

Eden took another sip and felt her heart race. Now greedy gulps made her head spin. Heedless of the adrenaline rush chocolate provided, she drained the mug with a long *aaaah!*

Yolo made a joyful sound, her soft brown eyes burning with excitement. Her reaction seemed extreme, but maybe that was how Aztec friends reacted to each other's important discoveries. Still, it seemed odd when she threw her slender arms around Eden's neck and cried out, *"Xochipilli!"*

Eden stiffened at the public display of affection. Her arms pressed into her sides like a toy soldier's. But did anyone really care? The women chatted in the kitchen while outside the shrill buzz of children's voices sawed the air.

Yolo pulled away, hurt welling in her eyes. Already Eden's earned happiness credit drained away.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Making an awkward effort, Eden pulled Yolo back into an embrace. Their breasts nested together like a pair of doves' wings. This wasn't bad, Eden thought. Inexplicably, Yolo's chest heaved, and tears slid over Eden's skin. At a loss to understand the girl's sudden anguish, Eden stroked her back and mumbled useless words, no better than the ones Bramford had offered. "Don't worry. It's all right."

A harsh knock at the door interrupted them. Yolo looked up at her, stricken with fear and something else—anticipation. Again Eden recalled Bramford's counsel:

—*There's a plan, Eden, and whether we like it or not, we're part of it.*

Was this "plan" troubling her girlfriend?

As Meztli opened the door a wedge of early light slanted across the floor. Scroll and Paw waited in front of the house; their adamant looks and military posture made clear their intent. *Time to go.*

Recalling Bramford's promise to meet her in the morning, Eden waved goodbye to her friends. To her surprise, Yolo fell in step beside her as she exited the house. Perhaps the plan involved her as a bridesmaid!

Yolo clasped Eden's hand, and they walked in companionable silence down the street behind the soldiers. The passersby reminded Eden of the people walking through the tunnels with the same hopeless expressions. Except here, the workday had just begun, while in the tunnels the population would be retiring to avoid the sun.

Yolo pointed to the quarter moon, soft and pale in a corner of the sky like a parenthesis to the day. *"Meztli,"* she said.

Eden got it. "Your mother's name means moon. Mine was called Lily. It used to be a common flower." Her chest tightened as she added, "She's dead now."

"Lily," Yolo repeated with deep sadness.

Eden glanced at her new friend. She understood, didn't she? Somehow Eden had communicated the very essence of her mother, and her longing for her, too, when she said her name. And Yolo had understood.

Perhaps after a lifetime a name became more than a proper noun. It grew attached to the person and carried with it feelings and memories so that simply saying it created a truer picture than a digital image ever could.

Eden smiled at Yolo and squeezed her hand. No, they

would not have any trouble communicating. At least not while Eden remained human.

But she would only think of now and be happy.

They reached the main square just as a ray of sunlight cleaved a bank of clouds and lit one side of the pyramid. There, to Eden's astonishment, she saw her father take the steep steps at a run. He gained the top before she and Yolo had reached the bottom of the staircase. She doubted whether a man half his age could have done it.

The soldiers lifted her and Yolo onto the bottom step, which reached to Eden's shoulder. She guessed that the height discouraged the uninvited, another clever design for intimidation.

The sun seemed to climb with them higher into the sky. The growing heat beat down on Eden's back. Sweat trickled down her chest, her heart banged in her chest. Yolo grew pale, and even the soldiers looked weary from the arduous climb.

Finally, when Eden pushed herself over the last step, an unexpected sense of freedom filled her. Maybe the free-floating sensation of being on top of that majestic structure released her. Or maybe the adrenaline from the climb and the chocolate drink gave her a lift. For whatever reason, she had never felt farther from her dungeon-like existence in the tunnels and the cruelties of the past.

Eden caught her breath as Bramford stepped away from a small group that included Huitzilopochtli, the astrologer, and her father. Moving towards her with preternatural grace, his dark skin silhouetted against the backdrop of slate-blue sky, Bramford truly looked like a god. She felt puny in comparison—a mere mortal.

When, Holy Mother, would she be his she-cat?

At the warm press of Yolo's hand on her arm, Eden turned to see a knowing look in her friend's eye. She introduced her friend and her fiancé. "Bramford, this is Yolo."

His penetrating gaze passed between the girls. To Eden's dismay, he simply gave Yolo a curt nod. Wasn't he happy that she had found a friend?

"Come now," he said, turning away.

If Yolo felt slighted, she didn't show it. *"Moyolehuani,"* she said, her eyes shifting impishly to Bramford.

"My *moyo* has a lot on his mind," Eden said by way of apology.

Together, they left the escorts behind and followed Bramford across the wide platform. Now Eden had a clear view of the two temples that stood at opposite ends of the pyramid. Their mismatched heights reflected an equal disparity in conditions, one intact, one crumbling.

Over the years, a great deal of devotion must have gone into maintaining the taller red-and-white structure on the right. Seeing a large jaguar pelt hanging at the entrance, Eden assumed this must be the abode of Tezcatlipoca, the god of sorcery who took on the jaguar guise—Bramford's deity. Considering the world's endless devotion to war, the superior state of this temple made sense. Even the malevolent air that hovered there spoke of the atrocities of war.

Eden gasped as something moved in the shadowy entrance. Peering closer, she spied a sullen man in an ornate copper chair. Red paint streaked down his brooding face.

Sure enough, he wore a jaguar skin around his shoulders with claws that hung over his hands and feet.

"Tezcatlipoca," Yolo said in a frightened whisper.

Eden had expected a more exalted person, someone worthy of the great Jaguar Man. But the god of sorcery looked bitter and mean-spirited.

He raised his arms and gave a violent shout that mingled with the clanking of metal chains. Why, he was chained like a prisoner! Eden suddenly recalled the jaguar warriors' angry responses to the mere mention of his name. If the people despised Tezcatlipoca, how did they feel about Bramford?

Yolo pulled Eden away, veering with her towards the opposite temple. She sounded desperate to reach it. *"Xochipilli, Xochipilli."*

It figured. The temple of love lay in ruins; bird droppings marked the broken walls, which had faded to a dull blue. The Aztecs had failed miserably to achieve balance among the gods.

Yolo took up a position behind Eden, who came to stand between her father and Bramford in front of a circular stone that must have been eleven feet across.

"Daught?" her father said.

Why did he always look so surprised to see her? And really, was he growing younger every day?

Across from them the astrologer weaved in place with his eyes closed, as if in a trance. The sun god greeted Eden with a blistering stare that failed to disguise a hidden caginess. She recognized that look; she'd seen it on Jamal. He had played her for a fool, all the while using her.

Again, she wondered what this all-powerful deity wanted from her.

Concentric circles were carved into the flat surface of the

large stone, and each bore a different series of stylized pictograms. Recalling her father's description, Eden realized that this was the Aztec calendar, the *tonalpoualli*. Just as he said, the inner wheel had thirteen symbols, one for each day of the Aztec week. On the outer wheel, she saw abstract pictograms that represented the different gods. Regardless of the nasty god of sorcery, Eden felt proud when she spied Ocelotl, the image that represented her Jaguar Man.

"Isn't this amazing!" her father exclaimed, sweeping his hand around the calendar stone. "You can see why it's called the count of destiny. See the image of a knife? Presently, this week honors the god of the knife, Tecpatl."

Eden studied the symbol. "Okay, but why worship a knife?"

He turned and pointed to another large round stone that near the edge of the platform. "That is the sacrificial stone upon which the Aztecs sacrificed their victims—if you look closely you can still see bloodstains. A ritual knife was used to cut out the victim's heart. Actually, the priest would cut through the abdomen in order to offer a still beating heart to the gods."

With near glee, he indicated a worn statue of a jaguar with a large extended bowl that stood near the stone. "The statue changed," her father continued, "depending on which god received the sacrifice. The priest placed the victim's heart in the bowl before tossing it into a fire. Then his aides threw the dead body down the pyramid steps. Quite a spectacle, I imagine."

A cold knot tightened around Eden's heart. "But that was in the past, right? They don't do that anymore, do they?"

Her father looked thoughtful. "I hadn't considered that."

Suddenly the astrologer sprang to life and began to chant. The eerie sounds floated on air as ancient as the pyramid beneath them. Eden only understood the word for her namesake, Xochipilli.

When the chant ended he laid a beautiful turquoise stone on top of an abstract flower that reminded Eden of the one painted in Yolo's home to represent Xochipilli. For a moment silence descended over the group. Then Huitzilopochtli and the astrologer turned to leave.

"Wait a minute," Eden demanded. "What's going on?"

The Aztecs rulers looked anxiously at Eden. Did they fear she would stray from "the script" again?

Disappointment colored her father's face—embarrassment, really. He spoke to her in a hushed voice. "Weren't you paying attention, Eden?"

She mirrored his frustration. "I saw him put a stone on top of the flower—and?"

"It's quite obvious that your wedding will take place when the week of love begins."

"Oh!" She quickly calculated the days. Only one god—the god of rain—came between the knife and the flower. "How far into the week of the knife are we?" she asked.

"Two days, I believe."

Eden smiled up at Bramford. "We're getting married in twenty-four days!"

"And then you'll be mine," he said.

"But what about my adaptation?"

The astrologer gave another loud pronouncement that included Xochipilli's name. This time Yolo cried out and fell to

her knees. The poor thing was sobbing. Eden knelt down to console her when Scroll and Paw lifted Yolo between them.

"No!" Eden said, clutching at her friend's arm.

Huitzilopochtli issued a hot command, and Scroll pushed her away. Bramford held her back, his soft promise failing to reassure her. "It's all right."

Stricken with fear, she watched the men carry Yolo into the decayed temple of love.

Eden looked wildly from one man to the next. "What's wrong with her?"

After a quick exchange with Huitzilopochtli, her father responded, "Apparently, the girl is a devotee of Xochipilli."

"So?"

"Yes, well." Blinking rapidly, he looked to Bramford for help.

"Eden," Bramford said, drawing her away to the edge of the platform. "For your sake, and theirs, don't get too attached to these people."

"Why not? I like them."

"Because they're not our kind."

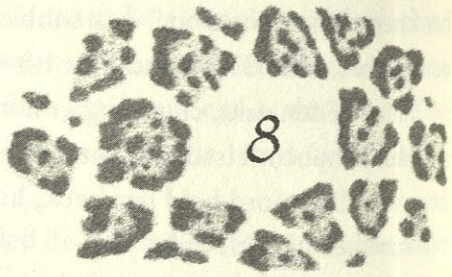
"Jaguar people?" she said, hopefully.

"Yes." His raspy voice held an edge of anticipation.

"But when will I be like you?"

"One step at a time."

Just then a jumble of whistles and drums echoed in the air. Eden gazed out at the plaza below, her nerves on fire. "What on Good Earth?"



8

LIKE A COLUMN of leafcutter ants that hauls leaves three times their size, Aztec men carried large objects on their backs as they crossed the central plaza in single file. Since they possessed no pack animals or wheeled vehicles, cargo moved either by canoe or on the backs of men.

Standing atop the pyramid, Eden surveyed the sight below. "What's happening?"

Her father sounded giddy beside her, though his explanation shed no light. "Naturally, we hope to restore the balance between the primary temples of love and war."

"With what?"

As Eden's gaze roved from one object to the next, they began to connect like cars in a train—old mainframe computers, solar panels, rustic furniture, stacks of books—until she understood, even as Bramford stated the plain facts. "We're going to reconstruct the lab in the temple of love."

She turned towards him, and full of hope, asked, "I'm going to adapt here?"

His deep purr raced up her spine and sent her heart aflame. "I told you not to worry," he said.

"Oooh." Eden pressed close to him, too relieved to chastise him for keeping this plan to himself. "I'll never doubt you again."

Bramford put his arm around her, his body heat spreading like a balm for her worries. "Mates should trust each other, don't you think?"

As she looked up into his golden eyes, a vision of them locked in the act of love entered her mind. "Yes, mates," she murmured.

So Xochipilli's temple would get a makeover, and the spiritual balance would tip back towards love. Well, if the solution to Eden's problems dovetailed with the Aztecs' need for heavenly order, so much the better.

And yet her gaze strayed to Tezcatlipoca's temple. The red walls gleamed a fiery hue in the bright morning light. Would the great god of sorcery relinquish his power while love resumed its natural place in the world?

Eden shrugged. *Just be happy.*

"How long will it take to rebuild the lab, Father?"

"In my estimation the allotted time before the wedding should suffice for the necessary construction and recalibration of equipment," he replied.

She wondered aloud at the strange synchronicity of events. "The Aztecs will let me adapt and get married right here in this lost village." Her voice sounded distant to her own ears, as if she was dreaming. But the stomping of the men's feet and the clanking of the equipment on the steps told her it was real. Even the anachronistic sight of the porters carrying the futuristic test bed up the ancient steps reassured her.

Bramford started down the incline. "I'll give them a hand."

Her gaze traced the muscles that rippled down his back. His long dark hair flew behind him, his hips moving with powerful speed. She heaved a sigh of relief. At last she would be his.

Standing there with a bird's eye view of the world, anything seemed possible. Even Eden, a lowly Pearl, felt powerful. Was that what happened to Tezcatlipoca—had the power had gone to his head? And yet he only had to gaze up into the endless sky where cotton clouds cabled into infinity to know how small he truly was.

More than ever, Eden admired Bramford's seemingly effortless ability to juggle power and humility. Perhaps that explained the tension lurking behind his eyes. And how would she handle the power that came with adaptation? At least Eden could rely on Bramford to show her the way.

Turning around, she found the platform empty. There was no one to stop her from entering the love goddess's shabby temple. Eden crept towards it, aware of something hidden there. Her heart beat high in her chest as she inched around the scarred entry columns. Peering inside, she saw a fire flickering in the gloomy recesses, the orange-red light reflected off cracked blue and white tiles. A low, tortured groan came from within.

She tiptoed down a narrow hall and entered a large womb-like room. Yolo lay on a cot by the entrance with her eyes closed. Eden tensed until she noted the slow rhythmic rise and fall of her friend's chest, the placid set of her features. The agonized sound could not have come from her.

Then who...?

Again Eden heard someone in distress, and jerking

around, spied her father kneeling beside the fire pit with his back to her.

She quickly crossed the room. "Father! Are you all right?"

"Uh." He sucked in a breath and scuttled away like a crab, no longer spry but with the creaky movements of an old man.

Eden stood over him, blocking his path. His pupils were dilated, his skin waxy. She followed his furtive glance towards a trestle with a cooking pot rigged over the fire. On the lip of the hearth sat a pile of roots.

"What's this?" she said, fearing the worst.

"Nothing," he mumbled.

Inspecting the pot, Eden found a murky mixture. One whiff of the foul smell with which Nature had cloaked the miraculous herbal medicine confirmed her fears.

She wheeled on her father. "You're experimenting with Newman's Cure? Are you crazy?"

Blinking furiously, he slid his arm behind his back. Eden tugged at his arm and gasped at the syringe in his hand. "Don't tell me you're shooting it directly into your bloodstream?"

His embarrassment dissolved in a burst of enthusiasm. "The effect is magnified, perhaps a hundredfold, beyond the application of a poultice!" Then he slumped back down, pale and sweaty.

Dumbfounded, Eden sank onto the edge of the fire pit. So that explained the mysterious surge in his strength.

She let out a long, miserable sigh. "You must quit. It's dangerous, like adding steroids to the Fountain of Youth. And what good has it done you? Look at you now."

Her father laughed with frightening mania. "I will never quit!" he cried. "You must realize what incredible research is possible."

"I realize you might kill yourself. You have no idea how powerful the medicine can be in liquid form, no way to monitor or test applications. You're not a lab rat." Her voice hitched with emotion. "You're my father, the only parent I have."

He looked crestfallen, like a child who shares a fantastic insect only to be scolded for bringing a mess indoors. "But, Daught, this is—"

"I know, evolution."

"Precisely." Of course he mistook her resignation for encouragement and continued in a conspiratorial voice. "By adding the plant's amazing properties to the next phase of adaptation, I...um...I predict an even stronger creation." Wiping his sweaty brow, he rose unsteadily to his feet. "I estimate that if we follow the trajectory of my own progress, and project it onto the current prototype—"

"Bramford is not a prototype, he's my fiancé! This is insanity. Promise you'll stop immediately."

"You don't understand. No, you see..." He shook his head, for once at a loss for words. Eden could almost see his thoughts tripping over each other like newborn puppies.

Then like a flower blooming before her eyes, his color returned with a rosy glow, and a luster came into his eyes. As the drug worked its way into his system, he seemed to shed twenty years. Full of vim and vigor again, he waved the syringe in the air and spoke with passion. "I tell you, the possibilities for increased strength are unimaginable. I am only beginning to discover there's more—much more!"

"No, stop." Eden shut her eyes and hung her head in her hands. She wanted to shut off her mind too, but years of being her father's researcher held sway. She looked up under her brow and said, helplessly, "What possibilities?"

"For example, living beyond time." He looked impish, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "As you may know, the great scientist Albert Einstein said, 'When a man sits with a pretty girl for an hour, it seems like a minute. But let him sit on a hot stove for a minute, and it's longer than any hour. That's relativity.'"

Eden could relate to the evanescent quality of time spent with Bramford as opposed to a single hour that had dragged on as if for years when she lived in the tunnels.

"But what on this Holy Green Earth are you suggesting, Father?"

"You see, Einstein proved that, 'the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion. Simply put, with a little help, if we are out of time, there is no reason that we should be subject to matter." At her puzzled look, he grew disappointed. "Really, Daught, I fear the current lack of intellectual pursuit has weakened your mind."

Eden stiffened. She didn't need his approval anymore, though the lack of it still stung. "I'm not interested in your far-fetched theories," she said. "We're bound to matter—a basic law of physics. If you think you can act beyond universal law, you're crazier than I thought."

"Ah, but I wonder," he said with a triumphant flair. "Haven't you noticed my increased physical prowess?"

At that he jumped high and spun around with the agility

of a ballet dancer. In quick succession he executed a strenuous series of push-ups and, without breaking a sweat, rose to his feet, grinning.

"Well?" her father said.

The smug, reckless look in his eyes scared Eden. She pointed towards the boiling pot. "How did you get the roots, anyway?"

"From the astrologer. I suppose he acted on orders from the sun god."

"And why would they give you the sacred plant?"

"You must see how precarious their world is," her father replied in a calm, tutorial voice. "In addition to war, Tezcatlipoca represents the night, the opposite of the sun. Yet who will remain to worship the sun if war wipes man from the face of Earth? Already we hide from Huitzilopochtli's deadly rays. Balance must be restored, the heavens decree."

Eden couldn't think about the state of the world in the face of her father's erratic behavior. She groaned. "What could possibly help you now?"

Naturally, he misinterpreted her question. "Only love," he said. "Unless Xochipilli resumes her rightful place, Tezcatlipoca will reach the zenith of his power. Should that happen, the war to end the world will occur, and love will die forever."

Eden stared off to the side, wondering. If love really died, would her love for Bramford vanish too? Impossible.

Yolo's soft moan brought Eden to her feet. Laying her fingers against her neck, she took Yolo's pulse: slow but steady. Her father appeared beside her with a beaker of the brown liquid distilled from Newman's Cure.

"This will help restore her," he said.

Eden stayed his hand. "How do you know it won't kill her?"

"I'll only give her a fractional dose. She's young and strong."

"Then what's wrong with her?"

"She seems to have suffered a shock. Perhaps being at the top of the pyramid in such divine company may have produced an excess of excitation."

That seemed likely; Yolo tended to be emotional. And weighing the risk of the drug against its benefits, Eden took the beaker from her father. "Let me do it."

She tipped the glass to Yolo's lips, giving her a taste. The girl murmured Xochipilli's name as her eyes fluttered open.

"Yolotli?" Eden said.

She thought she saw a flash of recognition in Yolo's dazed eyes before they closed again, and her friend drifted back to sleep.

As a log collapsed in the fire pit, a flicker of light illuminated the back wall of the temple. There, to Eden's surprise, she saw a picture of the love goddess in the throes of ecstasy, her eyes beguiled, her Mona Lisa smile seduced. In one hand, she held a sprig of Newman's Cure.

"But what does it mean?" Eden mused. "Is the fate of love tied to Newman's Cure?"

"That's what I'm saying," her father said, feverishly. "We have arrived at the threshold of a great discovery, perhaps as important as my process for adaptation. I can hardly believe how fortune has smiled upon me—twice in a lifetime."

Eden considered giving him a chance. After all, he had

invented the solution to mankind's survival. Who knew what else his inventive brain might produce?

"Can you be more specific?" she asked.

"Indeed," he said, too brightly. "By enhancing the adaptation process with this powerful herb, my hypothesis suggests that, at the very least, the test subject will gain additional strength, and possibly become impervious to illness too. A superior specimen in all regards."

A dull realization ground against Eden's nerves. Words failed her, and she slumped against the test bed.

"Yes, I thought you would see the potential," her father added. "Your years in the lab have benefited you, after all, I'm proud to say."

What Eden saw was terrifying yet so tempting. "You've been experimenting upon yourself in order to improve upon the next adaptation, and the test subject would be me. When were you going to tell me this, Father?"

He bristled. "In due time."

She jumped up, staring him down. "I absolutely forbid it."

"What? What?" he cried. "How can you be so blind to progress?"

"Stop tinkering with people's lives, Father! There are more important things to consider than science!" She strode across the room, and snatching up the pile of roots, threw them into the fire.

"What? No!" He raced forward, reaching towards the flames.

Eden grabbed his arm. "Stop! It's not worth it."

He hung his head on his chest and sighed. Like a balloon

slowly losing air, he sunk to the ground, muttering strange phrases. "Forgive them, for they know not what they do. All know the way, few may walk it."

Eden had seen her share of addicts in the tunnels; most had been hooked on oxy, which the Uni-Gov proscribed in daily allotments for the population. "The happy drug," they called it, though it was anything but. Desperate for an extra dose, addicts would do anything.

But Eden never thought she would see her cool-headed, rational father act like one of them. How could he compromise everything, his life, her adaptation, and Logan's too, for a spurt of youth and more scientific glory? Her mother had predicted such rash behavior, hadn't she? The memory of Eden's vow to watch over him softened her ire.

She kneeled beside him and spoke gently. "Promise me you'll stop this nonsense. And don't you dare go to the Aztecs' sacred grounds by yourself, either. It isn't safe."

"What could be more important than progress?" he asked with childlike innocence.

Eden sighed. "For one thing, love."

"Love?"

"You've never understood, Father. I don't expect you to start now."

He bristled in defense. "Man is a chemical being, at the mercy of his brain's activity. In the Old World, without the aid of oxy, hormonal activity caused men and women to fall in love, which activated the dopamine-rich areas of the brain in exactly the same way as addictive substances such as cocaine. In other words, one might say that love is simply another drug."

"Like I said, I don't expect you to understand."

"But," he said, pointedly, "my love for your mother went beyond mere chemistry. Don't you see that my devotion to this work simply offers a much-needed distraction from her absence? Even Einstein admitted that 'the laws of gravity cannot be held responsible for people falling in love.' Since I first laid eyes on your mother, all my theorems and hypotheses have failed me on that subject."

Doubting his sincerity—addicts will say anything for a fix—Eden rose to leave. But the rarity of a heartfelt conversation with her father held her back. The question that fell from her lips surprised her. "How do you know when love is real and not simply based on need or circumstance?"

Like if you're the only Jaguar Girl around?

"When you put another's needs before your own you know it's love," he replied at once. "For example, I do this—" he waved towards the cooking pot, "—for the love of man."

"That's the best equation you ever made, Father. But if you were to die, where would that leave mankind? And who would monitor my adaptation? For Earth's sake, leave it alone."

He nodded wearily. "As you wish, Daught."

From outside, the bustle of men groaning under the weight of their cargo floated into the musty chambers. Eden heard Bramford's easy but commanding voice. She rushed from the dimly lit temple, blinded by the stark light. As her eyes adjusted, she saw him carrying the test bed across the top of the pyramid. Did he really occupy all the space in the world, or was it only her imagination?

Bramford smiled at Eden with a look of love that went

beyond chemistry. She smiled back, feeling weightless as he passed in front of her. Their love would never die, no matter what happened to Xochipilli or how many Jaguar Girls existed.

Just then Tezcatlipoca shuffled out of the shadows, his feet bound by chains. He struck Eden with an evil look that landed like a blow to the gut. Clearly, the romance between his representative, the Jaguar Man, and Eden, the soon-to-be goddess of love, displeased him. But what could the imprisoned god do now?

9

EDEN SIGHED with contentment as Yolo splashed another bucketful of water on the heated walls of the bath, thickening the cloud of steam around them. Now that Bramford was busy building the new lab, the steam bath with Yolo had become the high point of Eden's daily routine. She lay naked on the tiled floor, taking in the sensual pleasures: Yolo's soulful humming, the crackling fire, the heady chocolate-scented vapors, and the soft patter of rain on the thatched roof.

The week of the knife had ended eleven days ago when the rain god took command with a sudden downpour. An intermittent rain had fallen ever since. Eden liked the rain, she was happy to discover.

Back in the Caterpillar, rainstorms had always brought disasters of tsunami-like proportions. Without proper vegetation to prevent landslides, floods often occurred, especially in the less desirable zones reserved for the Pearl.

Eden's thoughts drifted to the first time she and her parents had to evacuate their home unit due to the rising water level. They had lost their few possessions and started again. Afterwards a dank, musty smell had permeated everything—disease-laden bacteria blanketed the moldy tunnels. Even now the reminder made her queasy.

Here, the lush trees and shrubs provided protection against such climate extremes. And Eden no longer cringed at the thought of more rain. In fact she welcomed it.

The wooden bucket hit the floor with a thud. Yolo murmured; the same words she said every day. *All done.*

Eden peered through puffs of steam that swirled around Yolo's slender dark body like exotic veils. The willingness in her soft brown eyes, like a doe greeting the sunrise, touched something deep inside of Eden. What had she had done to deserve such a good friend? It seemed there was nothing Yolo wouldn't do for her: spicy cacao drinks, tortillas stuffed with rich beans and chocolate, too—food fit for the gods, or rather a goddess, Eden thought with amusement.

This endless devotion didn't seem to weigh on Yolo, either; she seemed to enjoy it. They often spent the long days together combing the mountainside or walking round the lake. Little by little they came to understand each other's signals and created their own unique language.

Now Yolo stretched out on the floor beside Eden with an enticing purr that reminded her of the feline sounds Bramford made. With deep longing she recalled their last encounter several days ago atop the pyramid. He had stopped working just long enough to give her a passionate kiss before he sent her away. At her protest, he cocked his head to one side with a lusty gaze.

—*You want to get married, don't you?*

She would have helped build the lab, but the Aztec men forbid women to work alongside of men. So, for the first time in her life, Eden was on vacation with her best friend. And she was happy.

Yolo rolled her body against Eden's and smiled. Humming her favorite tune, she traced a finger around Eden's stomach and then made a smaller circle inside the first, over and over.

"Xochipilli," Yolo repeated again and again.

Something tugged at Eden's mind. She tried to ignore it; she just wanted to enjoy the sweet sensations of her friend's touch. And yet the strong habit of inquiry that she had developed as a researcher persisted.

Locking her gaze on the peaked ceiling, Eden seized upon the nagging thought: the movement of Yolo's hands imitated the pattern of the Aztec calendar stone, the *tonalpohualli.* One circle showed the thirteen days of their week; the other brought into alignment the next god to be worshipped.

Tomorrow, on the last day dedicated to the god of rain, Eden finally would adapt. Her father's lab would be ready, and so would she. When Xochipilli's reign began the next day, Eden and Bramford would marry. These were the simple, if incredible, facts.

Just the beyond the obvious, however, like the sturdy adobe walls that appeared through the misty air, Eden sensed a deeper truth. Although random events pointed to it, she failed to find the thread that tied them together: Yolo's fainting spell at the temple of love, Tezcatlipoca's connection with Bramford and animosity towards Eden, even the impossible good luck of the Aztecs hosting her marriage and adaptation.

If Bramford had envisioned the future during his shaman's trance—and Eden suspected he had—he wasn't going to tell her, either to protect her, or to keep her from worrying over an outcome that might change. How had he put it? A

different "pattern" might be cut in the future. She simply had to wait and see.

As Eden turned to face Yolo the girl brought her leg against Eden's thigh, gently rolling her back onto the floor. For such a little thing, she was strong. But then, Eden offered scant resistance. Limp from the steam, sated on fatty foods and copious amounts of chocolate, she felt like putty in her friend's hands. *Like a pig being fattened for the slaughter?*

Yolo arched her slim eyebrows with a questioning look. *Are you okay?*

Eden sighed. "I'm fine."

But her friend seemed to know her better. She sat up and leaned over her, her long brown hair sweeping across Eden's chest. Yolo brushed her soft hands over Eden's eyelids, closing them. And because Yolo often gave her the same instructions, Eden understood. *Relax.* As if Yolo's job was to keep her calm and happy.

She massaged Eden's shoulders until her worries faded with a long exhale. Slowly, Yolo's hands moved across her breasts, taking a sweet, tortuous path to her hips and thighs. It worked. Eden fell back into a stupor of bliss.

Funny, how shy she had been about her nakedness. Now she reveled in it. Her languid body hung on the edge of anticipation, the dance between relaxation and desire heightening both extremes. She didn't even register the grunt outside until it became a growl.

Yolo whispered urgently, *"Moyolehuani."*

Eden jerked to a sitting position, and as Bramford opened the door she caught her breath.

He stepped inside, his presence like wildfire that swept

through the small room. Emerald eyes flashed in the mist and raked over her naked body. Eden stared at him, her desire a slap that shook her out of her torpor.

She didn't notice Yolo leave. Only later did she appreciate her friend's considerateness. The bath wasn't big enough for the three of them.

"Get dressed," Bramford said hoarsely. "We have a date to keep."

"We do?" Eden said.

He grinned. "We're going swimming."

Eden swallowed hard as his promise came back to her.

—Jaguars love to swim. And I'm going to teach you how.

She reached for her old dress, never taking her eyes off of him as she stepped into it. The waistband was tight, a result of being overfed. And she had to stretch the fabric over her chest to button the bodice.

Bramford stepped close and traced the edge of the top where her breasts plumped. A quivering feather floated inside her belly.

"You look nice," he said.

Without warning he swept her into his arms, holding her tight against her bare chest. Her head spun as he carried her outside into the starry night. When his eyes met hers she saw a twinge of sadness.

"One last ride," he said, tucking her onto his shoulders.

"Oh."

Never command him again? Then she would have to make this ride count, for both of them.

Eden squeezed her thighs around the back of his neck. Bramford purred, just the way she liked it, and picked up his

speed. The soggy ground absorbed the impact of his thundering feet.

He pressed his hot hands onto her bare thighs. His rolling shoulders kneaded her flesh. Leaning forward, Eden rode him fast. She drove her hips into him, her breasts rubbing against his head. Pleasure whipped through her, as she moaned his name. His savage cry sent a shudder through her.

Bramford carried her through ripe cornfields, the tassels tickling her feet. As they burst onto the edge of the lake, small, glossy green herons, *Butorides virescens*, rose up in a flutter of wings that echoed Eden's reckless heart, the *whom-whoom-whoom* of their cries as urgent as her need for Bramford.

A gibbous moon, pregnant with luminous light, nestled in an ebony sky. A full moon would grace her marriage ceremony, she realized. Maybe in time such a night would no longer remind her of the horrible moon dances that the Uni-Gov required the populace to attend. Fraught with danger, those events had left bitter memories.

Now a full moon would remind Eden only of this deep happiness.

Bramford slowed to a trot, passing by rows of canoes tied to wooden posts. The water lapped at the shore, beckoning them. He kept on, finally tuning past a grove of coconut trees onto a calm, secluded pool.

A small waterfall, diverted from the mighty torrent in the distance, cascaded down mossy rocks. An array of lime-colored bromeliads splattered with red, as if splotches of blood, *Neoregelia 'Aztec,'* sprouted between the crags to catch the spray in their stiff, overlapping leaves. Like buckets, the

plants provided small ecosystems for frogs, snails, worms, tiny crabs, and salamanders. Like Bramford, who provided a whole world for Eden.

She murmured with delight, "It's beautiful."

The warm silky water rushed over her legs, as Bramford slipped into the basin. Gently, he lifted her to face him. She wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms clasped round his chest. A ribbon of moonlight rippled across the water, bouncing silvery light into Bramford's luminous eyes. Eden got lost in his glow.

"I've wanted to bring you here ever since we arrived," he said, rocking her gently.

As she leaned forward to kiss him, he shifted away. "What is it?" she asked.

It did no good to push him, so Eden waited. She leaned back in the water, secure in Bramford's grasp, her long blond hair fanning across the water.

"Tomorrow, I adapt," she said dreamily.

Suddenly he pulled Eden against him. Her wet hair whipped around him. His hungry mouth crushed against hers, the desperation in his kiss frightening. Did Bramford regret that he would never again kiss this face?

Eden tore away from him, her voice wounded but firm. "Talk to me, please."

He took a long, slow breath before he spoke. "I wish I could protect you, but I'm afraid I can't."

"From what?"

"You can't really imagine what it will be like. No one can."

"Adapting, you mean?"

"Yes, that too." As Bramford searched the skies, Eden sensed there was more to tell. After a moment he looked at her and said, "You'll face tremendous pressure. I need to know that you can handle it."

"Does this have something to do with that gloomy war god?" she asked.

Bramford winced, as if she had hit a sore spot. Eden waited on edge for him to explain. Among the reeds, South American bullfrogs, *Leptodactylus pentadactylus,* provided rhythmic night music; the booming croaks kept time with her rapid-fire pulse.

He finally continued in a quiet voice. "If we do what we must then Tezcatlipoca will remain in his rightful place, and the natural spiritual order will be restored."

She probed further. "Do the Aztecs want to adapt?"

"That would be a sacrilegious act for them. However, the people will idolize you too. It's more of a burden than you realize."

"Yolo calls me Xochipilli." Eden laughed at the absurdity.

Bramford's face remained impassive, his eyes steady on her. She hoped he wasn't jealous of her friendship with Yolo. He was her earth, a solid anchor, Yolo an airy blue dream.

Then something shifted in his expression—a decision made? He sounded measured but hopeful. "Remember, Eden, as long as you and I and Logan are the only ones to adapt, everything will be fine. War will end, and when peace reigns at last we can spread your father's technology."

"By then many people may die. Isn't there any other way, Bramford?"

"I must believe this is the path. It's a matter of balance."

"How so?"

"We'll be the first adapted couple. A new beginning brings fresh opportunity for balance."

The idea brought a smile to Eden's lips. If only Bramford didn't sound so grim.

The tension in his face thickened as he went on. "If we stay here, nature will have a chance to reestablish balance in the new world we create. But if we return to the tunnels, the war to end the world will surely come, and everything will be lost."

Eden thought her father had exaggerated when he spoke of a great war. But never mind. "It doesn't matter," she said. "I told you, I'm never going back."

"Even if I'm at risk?" Bramford said with dead seriousness.

A dark shadow passed over her heart. She recalled the ghastly nightmare of his death—or was it a premonition?

"What did you see the night you took the *bejuco de oro*?" she asked.

"I saw how very much I love you," he answered. "That's all I ever see."

Had the gods censored him? *Don't tell the Pearl!* However difficult it was for her not to question him further—and it really drove her crazy—Eden decided to trust him.

"I love you too," she said, nuzzling his neck. "How could you think I'd ever leave you?"

Bramford tipped her chin, gently forcing her to meet his gaze. Looking deep into her eyes, he said, "And if I were no longer with you, would you still adapt?"

Eden stared at him, unable to imagine such a possibility. "No, please," she finally uttered.

"But you want to adapt, don't you?"

She gave a small nod. "More than anything."

"I can't allow it, unless you give me your word, Eden. Tell me you want to adapt more than you want to be with me. It must be more important than us."

She dug her hands into his shoulders. "For Earth's sake, what are you saying, Bramford? Are you asking me to choose?"

He stole a glance at his heavenly advisors and let out a deep breath. Then he fixed her with his calm gaze. "I'm asking you to consider the importance of your actions. You're taking on a great responsibility. Think about it."

Seventeen long years as an oppressed Pearl weighed heavily on Eden's mind. She had never dreamed she would be free—or in love, for that matter. Her adaptation and her love for Bramford were tied together; she could not imagine one without the other.

And yet Eden heard a small voice inside that demanded she become a fearless she-cat, no matter what. As usual Bramford was right; she needed to take this step for her own reasons. At the very least she wouldn't be able to blame him if she later regretted her decision, say if she ended up looking like a freak.

Eden mirrored Bramford's calm demeanor. "I promise. I want to adapt, more than anything." She gulped. Was it really true? "Yes, even more than being with you."

"And you'll never go back?"

"Never, not in fifty years."

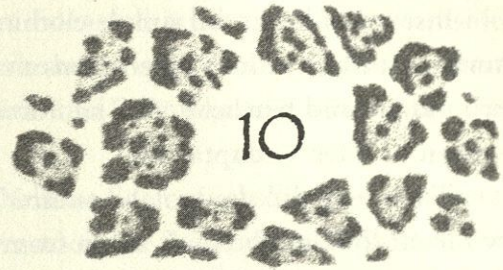
"Okay then," Bramford said.

The tension in his face washed away. A rough purr rumbled from his chest, the amorous sound moving over Eden like a wave that pulled her underwater. She clung to Bramford, her body molding to his.

"Let's swim—a beginner's lesson," he whispered.

He teased open her lips, his tongue moving deeper until Eden moaned. Her muscles tensed with sweet anticipation. And as the kiss went on, she let it carry away her worries, too.

Everything would be fine, just like Bramford said. Wasn't their love strong enough to balance the whole world?



10

A CHILL IN THE morning air fingered Eden's spine, pulling her from a restless sleep. By noon, Earth willing, she would be a she-cat! Everything she knew to be true about Eden Newman—her memories, likes and dislikes—was about to change.

She was happy about it, really. And she would adapt for her own reasons, not just to become Bramford's mate, really. If only she could calm the jitters in her stomach.

Turning in the bed she automatically reached for Yolo's warm embrace, surprised to find her gone. The others, Meztli, María, Lucy, and the children, were also missing. An eerie silence surrounded Eden.

She sat up on the edge of the bed, suddenly afraid. Would she have to face the day without her friend? Then from the communal yard Eden heard Yolo's sweet hum, and Meztli's reassuring voice. A steeple of gray light pointed in through the back door. Barely dawn; what were they doing out there?

Eden jumped out of bed and crossed the room. Stepping outside, she saw the bright orange globe of the sun peek over the rooftops, its long, amber arms reaching through the darkness. Yolo and her mother stood near the communal well, but did not react to Eden's presence.

Instead of her usual simple clothing, Yolo wore a flowing tunic of bright yellow diaphanous material, her plaited hair wound around her head. She had dressed fetively for the occasion of Eden's adaptation.

Then why did she look so numb? Yolo stared ahead with a vacant look as she took a cup from her mother. She drank its contents and handed it back, her eyes fixed once more on a distant point. She seemed unhappy, even resigned.

Of course Yolo must regret the coming change in their lives. No more languid steam baths and soft massages? Eden couldn't bear the thought, either. But just as they had carved out a friendship despite their cultural differences, they would find a way to remain friends.

From under the eaves of a neighboring roof, two female crimson-fronted parakeets, *Aratinga finschi*, chatted about the coming day like old friends discussing their daily routine. Eden and Yolo would be like that, wouldn't they? Nothing would change.

But as mother and daughter turned towards the house, Eden's anxiety for her friend increased. Yolo did not even look at Eden, her face pressed into a blank mask. The end of the braids jutted like two horn above her eyebrows, adding to her strange look. She walked across the yard, humming her melancholy song.

"Yolotli?" Eden said.

The girl passed by without a word.

Eden's chest tightened, her eyes questioning Meztli who gave her a reassuring smile. As she came near, Eden caught a heavy aroma from the mug in her hand. A sedative? Was Yolo that frightened?

With a heavy heart Eden followed her hostesses inside. Yolo sat on the edge of the bed, lost in a trance. Meztli pressed the usual chocolate drink into Eden's hands, when there was a knock on the door.

As Meztli opened the door Eden caught her breath. There, in the glow of soft light, stood her Jaguar Man. His sensuous smile invited her to join him.

Bramford wanted her, and Earth knew she wanted him.

Like a warrior going into battle, Eden banished her doubts. Gulping down the cold, frothy liquid, she felt an instant jolt of adrenaline. She handed the mug to Meztli and thanked her. But as Eden took in Yolo's vulnerable figure, her courage flagged.

Once more she tried to engage her friend. "Yolotli?"

Still no response.

Bramford beckoned her with a soft, demanding purr. *Come.*

There was nothing Eden could do for Yolo now. Later, they would spend time together. It would be all right.

Be happy, Eden.

Bramford held her in the crosshairs of his gaze as she walked towards him. He took her hand, his touch kindling her courage.

"Are you ready, Eden?" he said.

"Yes, I'm ready."

As they walked down the street, Eden stared in defiance at the rising sun. Never again would that awesome celestial body cause her fear. No longer would she be a Pearl who huddled in darkness.

Mother Earth, help me.

Ahead, she saw that the villagers already had gathered in the square. That explained why Yolo and Meztli had been alone in the yard. A line of people, young and old, male and female, had formed in front of two men in priestly capes.

Eden watched one of the priests hand a man a piece of gnarled plant root, which she recognized at once. "Newman's Cure."

"Hmmm," Bramford concurred. "Their weekly allotment."

After each villager received a piece of the root he bowed his head to the priest. Then he moved to the side and chewed the root for several minutes, while the next in line took his turn. After a minute, the first man spit the masticated pulp into a woven basket. And so the action was repeated as the line moved forward.

"It's kind of symbolic, isn't it?" Eden remarked. "Like Communion in the Old World, when priests gave the congregation a wafer that represented the body of the Savior. Well, this plant has saved the tribe from The Heat and obliteration."

"That's why we're here," Bramford said. "To make sure Mother Nature's last miracle survives."

Entering the dusky plaza, Eden felt the weight of the people's stares upon her. It was a big event, after all: a circus act, and she the freak. She kept her head down, making a beeline with Bramford for the pyramid.

As they passed by the crowd, an angry rumble filled the air. It was the sound of humans pitted against each other in their fight for survival. Eden had heard it often enough back

in the tunnels whenever a group of Coals cornered a Pearl or two.

"What's happening?" she asked, as her courage plummeted like a stone.

"Don't worry," Bramford replied.

"Is that all you can say?"

"This is the next step."

Eden searched his face for an explanation, but he seemed as confused as she was, which really worried her.

"I thought you could foresee what would happen?" she asked, with growing panic.

"I'm not the world's creator. I'm just a messenger. This is what we must do. Please, trust me."

Just then Eden caught the eye of a woman whose soulful gaze reminded her of her mother. And like her mother, she seemed to say: *We are our brothers' keepers.*

All of a sudden Eden understood how desperate these people were for her to adapt. Holy Earth, if she failed them they might tear her to pieces. Bramford had warned her of the responsibility that would come with adaptation, and now she felt the burden. As usual he had been right; it weighed more than she had imagined. But what did it matter if she was with him? She would follow her destiny, happily.

Somehow Aunt Emily had understood the bittersweet simplicity of Eden's feelings.

I have no life but this,
To lead it here:
Nor any death, but lest
Dispelled from there;

Nor tie to earths to come,
Nor action new,
Except through this extent,
The realm of you.

By the time Eden and Bramford reached the great pyramid, a column of sunlight traced a path up the incline. He helped her onto the first step, but as he moved to leap beside her, she stopped him.

"Stay, please."

He started in surprise. "Why?"

She looked down at him as she explained, "You told me to consider my actions, and I have. I need to walk into Father's lab on my own two feet." She gulped as she pictured herself walking on four feet.

Bramford hesitated, his eyes searching hers. "It isn't easy, Eden. You might need me."

With a jab of anxiety she recalled his tortured cries during the adaptation process. But she steeled her resolve, determined to change the pattern of their relationship. Starting right now, he needed to understand that she would no longer be a Pearl.

"It's an old custom, see?" She laughed to cover her fears. "Think of my adaptation as a fitting for my bridal gown. It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride's dress until the day of the wedding. You're supposed to pace up and down, wondering whether or not you're making a mistake—"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life," Bramford interrupted.

Eden drew in a sharp breath, fighting the jealous words

that burned at the tip of her tongue. *Not even when you took Rebecca as a mate?*

"What is it?" Bramford asked. "You're not still worried about how you'll look, are you? I meant it when I said you will be even more beautiful to me because you'll be mine."

Eden refused to let small thoughts ruin the moment. "When it's over, I'll find you," she said.

Bramford seemed to weigh his need against hers. Not so long ago he wouldn't have hesitated to demand his way. The change in him pleased her.

"I'll be fine," she added. "Trust me."

His hard-edged face softened with emotion. "As you wish. I'll be waiting for you."

Eden ached to hold onto him. *Go now, before you change your mind.*

"Meow," she teased, as she pivoted away.

Fighting the urge to look back, Eden began the climb. Earth forbid, if she ended up looking like a freak she would disappear and never see Bramford again. She would not hold him to his promise. She loved him that much.

As she neared the top of the steps, she heard his desperate growl curdle the air, his heavy steps pounding against the plaza. Her heart slammed in her chest. Glancing over her shoulder she saw the crowd part as he flew past.

Look what you've done. Happy now?

Breathless, Eden reached the platform, where she found her friends waiting. She looked at Logan, enfolded by Carmen and Etelvina. How would a young boy ever face such a shattering change as adaptation?

"I suppose you're next in line," she said to him.

Carmen shook her head furiously. *"No cambia menos conmigo."*

So the bossy little thing had decided he wouldn't adapt without her? One look at María's and Lornezo's set expressions told Eden they would never let their daughter adapt.

"What? What?" her father said, stepping out of Xochipilli's temple.

The recently fortified walls gleamed with a new coat of blue and white paint. Sunlight winked off the roof where the old solar panels now sat.

While the temple looked as good as new, her father appeared drawn, his limbs slack. Eden had not seen him since she had disposed of his "drugs," and his rapid decline shocked her. Perhaps a more moderate withdrawal would have been advisable.

She pulled him aside. "Are you all right, Father? Can you perform the operation?"

"Don't be absurd, I'm fine," he said, though his hands shook.

Kevon stepped beside him and repeated Carmen's ultimatum. "Please, Doctor, let me take Logan's place when the time comes," he added.

Her father did not hide his disappointment. "A Cotton, you see, what an incredible opportunity."

Eden knew that Bramford would never agree to Carmen's demands or Kevon's wishes. But she just couldn't think about it now.

"When do we begin?" she asked.

Her father looked into the blazing sky. "At noon when the sun is directly overhead. Now we must prepare." Then,

muttering under his breath about plant extracts and great opportunities no one appreciated, he walked back to the lab.

Eden started after him when a clang of whistles filled the air. Her heart leapt as she looked out over the plaza. Like a beautiful ship sailing across the sea, Yolo rode atop a litter carried by six men. The villagers clamored to touch her, pleading for her help. She stared ahead, a dreamy look on her face.

Why, Yolo was a star!

The sun god emerged from Tezcatlipoca's temple, followed by his astrologer. Together they walked with lively steps to the sacrificial stone.

Next, the god of sorcery shuffled from his abode, his chains rattling against the stone floor. He slumped down in his throne at the entrance like a boy sent to the corner for punishment. Clearly, Huitzilopochtli had gained the upper hand in his efforts to restore balance.

Eden's former guides, Scroll and Paw, came to stand on either side of her. She glanced from one to the other, a creepy feeling working its way through her gut.

Once more the Aztecs' generosity puzzled her. They had even brought Yolo here for comfort and support, even if she seemed to be asleep. She lay on the cot with her eyes closed as the men carried her up the pyramid steps.

Eden's voice boomed from on high. "Yolotli?"

Still, her friend did not react.

Behind her, Eden heard a chilling familiar sound: a knife slid from its sheath. The horrible memory of a Pearl she had once seen knifed to death in the tunnels flashed in her mind. Turning around, she saw the astrologer sharpening a beauti-

ful knife against the sacrificial stone slab. It had a dark blade, probably flint, and a pretty mosaic of turquoise decorated the handle.

Eden's knees wobbled as she recalled her father's explanation.

—A ritual knife was used to cut out the hearts of sacrificial victims.

Two attendants carried out a gleaming statue of Xochipilli and set it atop the sacrificial stone where the jaguar statue had once stood. Huitzilopochtli and the astrologer beamed with excitement, as the attendants lit a fire in the pit of the stone. In sharp contrast, Eden noted Tezcatlipoca's defeated expression.

Her thoughts bent to a million questions that formed and reformed like fantastic fractals, the irregular geometric shapes with which her father had developed the genetic miracle he was about to bestow upon her. And then, as Eden's gaze came to rest on the bowl that extended from the statue, she recalled more information.

—The statue changed, depending on which god received the sacrifice. The priest placed the victim's heart in the bowl before tossing it into a fire.

With frightening clarity the pieces of the puzzle slammed into place: Yolo worked for the love goddess. She was also devoted to Eden, and called her by the name of her ruler. Her future had been ordained at birth with the name "Heart."

And Yolo had fainted here because—

The truth hit Eden like a rushing train. The gods—Xochipilli or Huitzilopochtli, Eden didn't care which—required a

virgin sacrifice. For the love of Earth, they were going to cut out Yolo's heart!

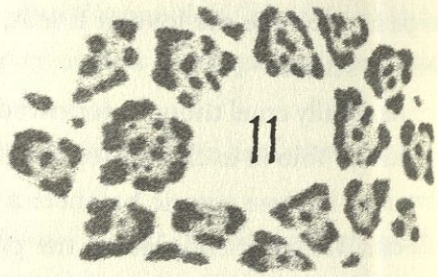
An equally cruel thought followed: the Aztecs were going to sacrifice Yolo in exchange for Eden's adaptation. Did their lives hang in some cosmic balance: a nice virgin for a hybrid she-cat? Was her friend's death the price for Eden's freedom?

Mother Earth, tell me it isn't true!

The eagerness in the people's faces below told her it was so. Somehow they believed her adaptation would restore balance to their world.

From deep inside Eden rose a curdling scream that shattered the air. "No!"

This time the Aztecs had anticipated the possibility that she would stray from her role. The warriors seized her as she attempted to flee down the pyramid's steps.



11

THE BITTER TASTE of bile backed up in Eden's throat, as she watched the porters lift Yolo's limp body onto the sacrificial stone slab. The priest's aides did not even need to tie her down. Her eyes remained closed, her legs crossed to symbolize her virginity. She continued to hum that plaintive tune that now broke Eden's heart.

Huitzilopochtli and the astrologer watched over the proceedings with great anticipation. Did they really believe the gods would find favor in Eden's adaptation if they sacrificed Yolo's life?

In desperation, Eden cried out. "Yolotli! Don't do it! It isn't worth it."

Xochipilli's willing handmaiden did not reply.

Eden twisted against the guards' grasp, but could not wrest free. The Huaorani women and children looked on with concern. Kevon placed a protective arm around Logan, who huddled with the young girls. If only Eden hadn't sent the Jaguar Man away—he alone could help her now.

She hung her head back and cried out. "Bramford!"

The wind carried her voice away like a brittle leaf. Her bridegroom probably had no idea of the horror happening here. *Or did he?*

The possibility chilled her to the bone. Had he envisioned Yolo's sacrifice in his shamanistic trance? Was this part of the so-called plan? Eden refused to believe it.

She couldn't think about it now, she simply couldn't.

A drummer appeared at the top of the steps and began to play a wide instrument with a pair of mallets. The thundering sounds echoed in the plaza below, whipping the crowd into an ecstatic swoon. They chanted Eden's new name: the Jaguar Goddess!

"Xochipilli Ocelotl! Xochipilli Ocelotl!"

The Jaguar Girl becomes the goddess of love. So Yolo had been right after all. Whatever the plan, Eden was an integral part of it.

Craning her neck, she glimpsed Meztli in the forefront of the crowd. Her rapt expression hinted of pride. Long before Eden had arrived, mother and daughter had prepared for this day. How cruel the nickname Yolo now seemed: you only live once.

Tears burned Eden's eyes. Fighting them back, she glared at the orchestrator of this barbaric ritual. She would never let Huitzilopochtli see her pain.

I'm a stone in a cool, dark cave.

The sun god gazed into the heavens and threw up his arms. His electric voice whipped over the platform, precipitating a long roll of the drums like lightning before thunder. He cried out to Xochipilli in counter-rhythm to the crowd, bringing their chant to a fever pitch.

As the astrologer raised the ceremonial knife into the air, sunlight glinted off the blade. What a beautiful knife, like a lovely girl in the clutches of a rapist.

"I won't adapt!" Eden cried. "Let me go!"

Huitzilopochtli shot her a look that could shrivel stone. He nodded, and a male aide stepped out of the shadows carrying a mug. As he came near, Eden caught the same dopey aroma of the drink Yolo had taken at dawn, and the name popped into her head: angel's trumpet, a highly toxic narcotic, also called *yerba de huaca*, or plant of the tomb, because it was given to women who were buried alive with their dead masters.

No wonder Yolo was in a trance. And now those bastards intended to drug Eden too.

"No!" she cried, fighting in vain against Scroll and Paw.

Kevon rushed forward in a burst of courage. "Let her go!"

Another jaguar warrior stopped him with the point of his spear. Clearly, he would not hesitate to kill anyone who interfered with this long-awaited event.

Eden cried out. "Stay back, Kevon!" She couldn't bear to be the cause of his death too.

"But—"

What could she say? "This is part of a plan for the greater good. We simply have to accept it."

Even if she didn't believe it was true, she succeeded in saving Kevon. He hurried back to the children, who clung to him, their eyes wide with fright.

As the aide pressed the mug to Eden's lips, she spit in his eye. "Burn on Earth!"

Once more the warrior aimed his spear at Kevon's heart. Eden's shoulders slumped. What choice did she have?

Huitzilopochtli reacted with a sly grin, like the sun peeking behind storm clouds. He had won—for now, anyway. Eden gulped down the drink.

Through it all, the villagers' ecstatic chanting droned on like the tramp of an advancing army. Each shout seemed to send Tezcatlipoca deeper into despair. With sudden clarity Eden understood he was on her side, in a manner of speaking. Neither wanted Yolo's sacrifice, although probably for different reasons.

And then Eden grasped a final truth: Yolo's death and Eden's adaptation as the Jaguar Goddess would bring new strength to Xochipilli, along with a resurgence of love. But if Eden was going to represent love, and Bramford already stood in for war, how would two polar opposites ever unite?

Her cold glance passed down the line from Huitzilopochtli, to his astrologer, to Tezcatlipoca, and back again. Eden hoped they understood exactly what she said. "I'll get you for this! When I'm a she-cat, I'll tear you from limb to limb!" Her words slurred as the drug took hold. "No matter what it costs me, one day you each will lie on that slab and die a painful death."

Her head weighed like a stone. Her limbs trembled. Finally Eden slid to the ground, defeated. Darkness seeped into the edges of her mind.

Stay awake!

If nothing else, she must be a witness to Yolo's death. She must never forget the steep price her friend paid for her freedom. And, finally Eden must adapt—the only way to make those bastards pay.

Yolo's innocent humming reached a high crescendo. Did the poor thing sense the end was near?

The astrologer's arm swooped down like a raptor's fierce dive. As he cut a hole in Yolo's diaphragm with that pretty knife, blood spurted into the air, splattering onto her fine tunic. Her hopeful hum became a muffled groan.

Just like that, Yolo's murderer tore out her heart. As he held it high, a cheer rose from the crowd below. Then he placed Yolo's beating heart in the bowl of Xochipilli's statue. Huitzilopochtli issued a victorious proclamation, to which the villagers cried out with joy.

Eden's stomach roiled, her head weaved. With tremendous effort she kept her vigil. Stone-faced, she watched two warriors carry Yolo's lifeless body to the edge of the steps, leaving a trail of blood. But as they tossed her friend over the edge, Eden shut her eyes.

In the sudden hush of the crowd, she heard Yolo's body thud onto the steps. There was another thump, and one more. Then nothing but a gruesome silence reigned.

Now Eden begged for the drug to take her. And like a greedy thief, it stole her hold on the here and now. A psychedelic flood of colors swirled before her eyes. As the warriors lifted her into the air, she dreamed that she flew with Yolo to a picturesque beach at a sunny shore.

The brisk sea air tingles with the tangy smells of marine algae and suntan lotion. Sharp cries of seagulls and children mingle with the rolling crash of waves. Yolo and I stand ankle-deep in the cool water, holding up our skirts and giggling as the rushing sea washes over our legs. It's the first time we've seen the ocean, and we're really happy.

Girls and boys in bathing suits play on the sand, their white skin carelessly exposed to the sun. No blisters appear, no grotesque blackish burns. The sparkling sunshine feels like a loving caress.

A teenage girl looks familiar, achingly so. Blond and blue-eyed, she wears a polka-dot bikini and plays catch with a handsome boy. I've seen them before, but where?

When her boyfriend tosses the large multicolored ball to her, the wind sends it flying in my direction. I jump up to catch it. Ms. Polka-Dot Bikini runs towards me, her smile dazzling.

"You're beautiful," she says.

I hand her the ball. "Do I know you?"

"Of course. We're sisters." She returns to her game, leaving me befuddled.

"What does it mean?" I ask Mother, who suddenly appears in the surf beside me.

"I told you, Daughter," she replies. "We're all related, regardless of color. The Earth is our home."

"But how do I know it's true?"

"How was Aunt Emily able to capture things in her poems that she had never seen?"

At a loss to understand, I simply shrug.

Sunlight dances on the tips of the waves, like diamonds on a jeweler's black velvet cloth, and bounces into Mother's smiling blue eyes. Her youthful glow surprises me. She always seemed so tired.

Mother speaks with quiet conviction. "Look with your heart and you'll find the answers, Eden. That's how Emily

saw the world. Remember this poem? 'I never saw a moor, / I never saw the sea; / Yet know I how the heather looks, / And what a wave must be. / I never spoke with God, / Nor visited in heaven; / Yet certain am I of the spot / As if the chart were given.'"

"Yes, I see." An invisible current of love connects all of life. Mother is right; if I look with my heart, love will guide me. And then, thinking of Father's adopted theories of relativity, I add, "Maybe Father understands this too."

"In his own way he acts for love," she says.

Yolo concurs, speaking my language at last. "We are all the same. One day, Eden, I hope you will understand that I died for love."

Died?

The reminder jogged Eden from her reverie. Too soon, the seaside images washed away like the outgoing tide. Opening her eyes, she felt the grip of restraints on her arms and legs. The test bed beneath her was all too real.

Before her, she saw Xochipilli's image on the shining temple wall. The goddess writhed in ecstasy, caught up in her tantric dance. She seemed to instruct Eden. *The world has forsaken me. You will restore me to my rightful place before it is too late. Do not fail me. Or all will be lost.*

Reality intruded upon Eden's awareness as her father stepped into her line of vision. She resisted the pull of consciousness. Too many painful memories gathered there, waiting to pounce on her. But urgent questions chained her to the present.

"What does she mean, Father?"

"What? Who?" he said, busy with a series of test tubes and boiling beakers.

Eden pulled against her restraints, growing agitated. "Why do they want me to adapt? Won't someone tell me?"

Kevon loomed in front of her. "Calm down, or you'll hurt yourself."

She fought off her daze. "The love goddess says I'll restore her to her rightful place—but how?"

Her father chuckled. "A prime example of the theory of relativity. A while ago I explained the balancing act between the gods, and now you remember it as if you have heard it for the first time." He fiddled with a tube that ran from a beaker to her arm. Eden could not see or remember what it contained. "Of course," he added, "the drug may increase your sensitivity in unexpected ways. For all I know you may actual hear the gods speak. I will be anxious for your full report after the operation."

"What are you hiding from me?" Eden demanded.

"Hmmm." He looked right through her. "The subject needs more medication."

"No!"

He picked up a syringe. "The Aztecs gave you angel's trumpet, *Brugmansia 'Feingold'*, as a sedative—just enough to make you sleep. It won't kill you."

"If you don't answer me I swear I'll never speak to you again."

"I think she means it, Doctor," Kevon said.

Her father arched his bushy eyebrows. "You are asking me to weigh the conceptual against the actual. Impossible, I tell you."

Eden shouted at him. "When you give me your crazy DNA cocktail, my transformation will be very actual. Tell me what the Aztecs want, or don't do this!"

"I see," he said thoughtfully. "As I said, for centuries they maintained cosmic balance by means of their calendar. They need to restore order, or they will die. We all will, apparently."

He paused to turn down the flame under a beaker. Eden's stomach tightened, as if hot iron screws bolted her to the bed.

"Go on," she said.

"You said it yourself, Daught. It seems as if the world has already ended, at least as it used to be."

"Are you saying that the imbalance in the heavens brought about the Great Meltdown? That it's vital to Earth's survival."

"Indeed."

A ray of light shot through the solar panels, warming Eden's arm. At the same time, a cold shiver traversed her body. Hot and cold. Life and death. Somehow Eden hung in the nexus between it all.

In a matter of minutes the sun would move into the center of the sky, offering her a chance for a new life. Already the rudimentary motor that powered her father's tools had kicked into gear.

Eden racked her brain for understanding. "You said there would be a great war, a war to end the world, if spiritual balance did not return. If the Aztecs expect me to be the incarnation of the love—which is clearly what Yolo believed—" A bittersweet memory of them together in the steam bath choked off her voice.

Yolo paid with her life for that belief!

The heat rose as the sun climbed higher. Warm amber light flushed the makeshift lab—almost noon.

Eden finished her thought. "Then there's only one reason for them to want my adaptation."

Kevon leaned over her. "What is it?'

"They must believe that I'll set the balance right between the gods like some sort of avenging angel. Is that right, Father?"

"Quite logical," he said as he jabbed the syringe into her arm.

"Wait, there's more," she said, afraid to lose her train of thought.

"I'll help you," Kevon said with a blinding flash of hatred in his hazel eyes. "We'll avenge the Pearls, you and I. Tell your father I can adapt and we'll fight together."

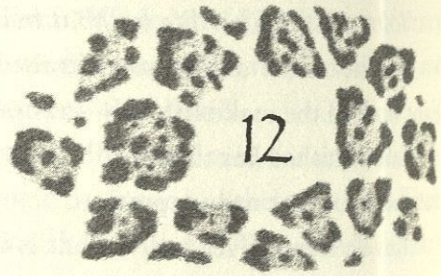
"I, um..." Bramford had forbidden it. How could she?

Her thoughts began to spill out like old-fashioned marbles tipped from a jar, bouncing erratically, scattering far. A vivid one caught her attention, even as she struggled to focus. What did her father mean—"the drug may increase your sensitivity in unexpected ways"? Familiar with the ins and outs of the operation, she did not recall any such thing.

"Wait a minute," she began when the sun set the room ablaze with hot light.

Eden gasped as an invisible, treacherous force struck her. A heavy door slammed shut in her mind, leaving her stranded in a blinding field of white.

Where am I?



12

DEADLY FORCE surged through Eden's body like a million rivers converging in a flood that swept her over barren fields, past rocky outcrops, and then suddenly deposited her onto a high desert field abloom with bright flowers that pin-wheeled around and around, leaving her lightheaded.

The air was fresh and clear, the sky untrammeled. A roadrunner scampered across her path, piquing a startling bloodthirsty hunger in her. This dry, sun-drenched place, beautiful in its starkness, appeared in her mind with details so fine and familiar that she realized she knew it well. But how could that be?

No, not you, Eden, a fading voice whispered.

Of course she had never been here before. These memories belonged to another mind, alien and yet familiar, like hearing a song for the first time and realizing you already know the melody. The collective minds of her donors, the jaguar, the anaconda, and the harpy eagle, were beginning to take control. Eden detected another influence too, more subtle, and surprisingly lovely, though she could not name it.

Resistance was futile. Nor did she want to stop this precise reorganization of her mind.

What Eden really wanted to do was to run, fast and far. The itch to tear at high speed across that imagined desert plain percolated through her body. In the distance, beyond the sea of sand and shrub, she sensed her destination: an overgrown jungle teaming with life. That was where she belonged.

But not yet.

Her frustration boiled to a fever pitch. Her old self still tethered her to the past. From faraway, in her mind's eye Eden saw her writhing body strapped to the test bed. The tortured screams that echoed off the tile walls seemed to belong to another girl. Her allegiance to that small, defenseless, pale creature crumbled like weathered rocks turned to dust.

The rapid changes in her body fascinated the evolving Eden. It widened and lengthened, snapping and popping and shaking. A dark, mysterious and uncontrollable current rippled through her, taking away long held ideas of good and bad, of right and wrong, along with her human form.

Finally, more easily than she had imagined, she sloughed off her former self like a snake shedding an old skin. Eden Newman was gone. Only the present moment interested her—nothing else mattered, it turned out.

Why not accept things as they were? *Be happy.*

Eden wanted to laugh at the freedom that exploded within her. Instead, she heard herself roar! The absolute thrill of that fearless sound stitched together her adapted consciousness in a sudden rush.

Opening her eyes, Eden stared up into the golden dome overhead. For the first time she viewed the world as a she-cat, and claimed it with a lover's caress. How had she ever perceived life as something to fight against or even fear? Now

the very skin of existence attached to her, pulsing with passion and joy.

Her lips moved over sharp teeth, teeth that could kill. That was it—Eden wanted to kill something!

Snarling, she ripped off the ties that bound her and leapt off the test bed. To her surprise, an old white man and a young brown one stared at her with great interest and fear. Instinct told Eden they meant no harm.

She remembered how once the color of someone's skin had signified worth or importance. To her new way of thinking, each and every color had value. And then the question arose: what color was she?

Eden glanced down at her arms and legs with a puzzled grunt. A shade or two off midnight—not as dark as her cousin, the black jaguar; more like dusky twilight.

"Daught?" the old man said, poised with pen and paper. "Could you describe what you are experiencing? Any sensation, physical or emotional, will be helpful."

In a flash Eden knew him and the other one, too—father and brother. She also understood that she had begun to balance her old human mind with her new animal mind, as if mixing together two opposing colors into an earthy hue. More importantly, the dye was not set—not yet, anyway. She could take the point of view of a human or a beast, depending on the situation and her inclination. Though perhaps, she mused, this ability would fade in time as she grew to prefer one outlook to the other.

Now, that was evolution!

The teenager—Kevon was his name—gave her a hesitant smile. "Are you okay, Eden?"

Eden? A host of images and associations, mostly unwanted, popped into her head. She pushed aside the negative connotations—ugly, weak, useless. Why not cherry-pick whatever good she could take from the past, and discard the rest?

"Why aren't I darker?" she asked.

The sound of her voice startled her. Eden hardly recognized the raspy, molten sound or its cutting tone. But as the shock passed, she felt the ownership—and proudly, too.

"It appears that your recessive Caucasian genes modified those of the black jaguar more than I anticipated," her father said.

His intense scrutiny, which reminded her of peering at a dissected insect, angered her. She struggled with a nagging reminder. He was hiding something—but what?

"Since you're the first Pearl to adapt," he continued, scribbling furiously, "further study will be needed to adjust the formula. Particularly in Logan's case—if he is to adapt—I must ensure a darker coloring."

"Too bad, now you're mixed like me," Kevon said.

Recalling his earlier attempt to protect her, Eden labeled him, friend.

"Better camouflage," she told him. "Too dark and you stand out in the light. This way, I'll blend in."

He grimaced. "But I won't ever hide in the jungle like you, remember?"

"Yes, I remember." Eden turned to her father, her decision made. "Kevon is your next subject. Adapt him at once."

"What?" He looked up from his note-taking, blinking fast. "It's forbidden."

"I say you will."

"But Eden—"

She lashed out with an angry roar that rattled the solar panels overhead. Her father backed off, the color draining from his face. Tripping over a stool, he fell to the ground with a sharp squeal.

Eden's anger dissipated as a familiar tenderness seized her. "Father!" she cried, swooping to his side.

He stared up at her with a distant expression. His thoughts seemed to tumble pell-mell, twisting and turning the light in his eyes at a baffling pace. How complicated he must be!

"I wonder what your mother would have thought," he said in a small voice.

Mother?

Now tender memories engulfed Eden, accompanied by a unique feeling of comfort. She recalled a laugh like the pure, melancholy whistle of an eastern meadowlark, *Sturnella magna*. Yes, Mother. She was dead.

The reminder saddened Eden.

She stared off into space, toying with the concepts of past and present, like a cat teasing a mouse. The past barely fit into her brand-new, beastly perspective. Did she have any use for such sublime emotions, this filial love, for example, which could weaken her, or should she toss it aside?

Then another emotion bloomed inside her: a different type of love, along with an intense longing for the Jaguar Man. In some part of the human faculties Eden had retained, she understood that love could not be compartmentalized. She decided it was better to love, even if it made her vulnerable.

"Daught, are you all right?" her father asked.

Turning back to him, she saw a thin line of blood trickling down his temple. She licked her lips. Her pulse fired. A loud call blared in her mind—not a word, but a powerful, irresistible concept: *kill.*

Eden gave a warning cough-like sound, half hoping that her prey—her human father—would escape. But the man remained frozen to the spot. Unable to control her feeding impulse, she bared her teeth. He simply watched in fascination. Finally she grabbed him, yanking him up from the floor with an ominous growl.

"What do you feel at this moment?" he said, showing more curiosity than fear.

Kevon had more sense. "Watch out, Doctor!"

He wiped the blood from her father's face with a cloth and threw it across the room. Eden jerked back with a sharp breath. Blood pounded in her ears. Inside her, two voices waged a war: one familiar but irritating, the other full of excitement and danger.

Was she really going to kill her father? And yet, she must kill!

"Put me down, Eden," he insisted.

She obeyed because instinct told her to cling to trusted habits. Until she could control her newfound power she would proceed with caution. How had Bramford wielded such self-control when he first adapted, especially with no one to model his behavior?

And with the reminder that she was the first Jaguar Girl came a vague and silly worry of what Bramford would think of her appearance.

Kevon echoed her old fears with apparent ambivalence. "You look so different, Sis."

Once he and her father had stood taller than she. Now she looked down her nose at them, trying to gauge their reactions. But something was missing. It was as if the lens through which she viewed the world had been stripped of more subtle colors, leaving only bold primary strokes. The men were on edge—that much was clear—but what did that reveal about her looks? And did she care?

Her father repeated his earlier question. "First impressions are valuable. What can you tell me?"

"It's like being born all over again," Eden said, discovering her words as she spoke. "But with memories intact. Some I recognize, some I don't, although the familiar ones don't seem as important as they once did. I'm more interested in the new information that I've been given."

"Indeed! The female human brain, with its increased capacity for communication, may provide us with unexpected insights into the adaptation process. Alas, Bramford, a man of few words, has provided little emotional feedback."

Her father scribbled notes as he continued. "The jaguar, an aggressive predator, is the logical choice to represent a god who incites wars. On the other hand, the goddess of love—female and nurturing—provides balance, though not enough to weigh against the exalted position of war. You, the Jaguar Girl, chosen as the earthly representative of Xochipilli, bring power *and* love—the answer to their prayers."

His excited babbling gave Eden a headache. So many words, too much thinking. Was it really necessary? She wanted to take a swipe at him. Instead she ignored him—surprisingly easy to do.

She studied the mottled spots that appeared like tattoos

on her skin. Her hands were no longer delicate, but strong and padded, her nails razor-sharp. Her abdomen rippled with hard packs of muscle.

The old white dress had torn across her midriff, leaving a separate skirt and a small bodice. It had once belonged to Rebecca, Bramford's dead mate. Now there was an association Eden could discard. Rebecca was dead, and there was no reason to think of her ever again.

As her father droned on, Eden continued her self-inspection. She ran her hand down her long hair, delighted with its silky texture and lustrous dark color. Like Bramford's, she thought, remembering how she loved to dig her fingers into his hair.

Flexing her powerful thighs, Eden gave a sigh. She would no longer be able to ride on his shoulders. They would, by necessity, run side by side. But what a magnificent couple they would make! Why had she ever feared he might not want her?

A ray of sunlight glanced off a shiny surface and caught Eden's eye. A silver hand mirror that had belonged to Rebecca sat beside some instruments.

Eden strode forward, almost tripping over her feet like a child learning to walk. Her proportions had changed, limbs and feet grown larger. Righting herself, she snatched the mirror and, unlike her former self, did not hesitate to look at her reflection.

"Oh," Eden murmured, brushing a hand over a sharp cheekbone.

I'm beautiful, aren't I?

Gleaming golden green eyes stared back at her with un-

nerving confidence. Her brow was hard—strong enough to butt a creature to death. And her strong white teeth gleamed; the points had grown sharp as nails. Eden licked her full, sensuous lips, imagining them locked onto Bramford's.

She was a thrilling, sexy she-cat!

Her father approached cautiously with an antiquated set of electrodes. "I am going to take your vitals," he said in a professional tone.

She brushed past him, her stride long and sinuous. "Not now."

"But—"

"I have a date."

Pausing by the exit, Eden traced the image painted there of the female deity. Vague, threatening memories drifted just beyond her awareness. They reeked of raw human emotions, which felt as dangerous as her blood thirst.

"That's Xochipilli, the goddess of love," her father explained.

Again Eden sensed that he was hiding something. A quick glance revealed the wariness in his eyes. What had he meant earlier?

—You're the answer to their prayers.

She shrugged off her concern. From now on, she would decide whose prayers she answered and make allies with those she trusted—like Kevon.

"Remember, Father," she said pointedly. "Adapt the teen as soon as you can."

Kevon gasped. "Really?"

"You're my friend aren't you?"

"You won't regret it, I swear."

"What? What?" her father sputtered. "What about Bramford?"

Eden leveled a cool gaze at him. "What about him?"

"You must remember he has forbidden anyone but you and his son—"

She cut him off with a snarl. "That's the past. No one forbids me anymore, not even my future mate."

Her father looked astonished. Perhaps he would finally see the Real Eden.

"Indeed," he said. "I'm hoping for a large tribe. The more the merrier, I say. Of course it will take some time to prepare for Kevon's—"

"Just do as I say."

Eden bounded away, amazed at the powerful spring in her stride. Stepping outside, she was glad to find the platform empty. Already she found people tiresome.

She marveled at her vision's quick adjustment to the sheer wall of crystalline light. The warm sunshine reminded her of a sweet dream. Her breath flowed easily, her body moving in rhythm to a soundless beat. Eden laughed to think of her mother's constant advice.

—Breathe the way an animal does. It's the key to happiness.

How odd to strive for happiness when it lay before you in abundance like a table piled high for a feast. Never again would Eden fear earth or sky. Instinctively, she offered a silent prayer to an old friend.

Thank you, Mother Earth.

Looking out over the grand plaza and the shimmering lake beyond, Eden took in an amazing amount of detail, as

vivid as the 3D Holo-Images she had interacted with in the tunnels. But this was real.

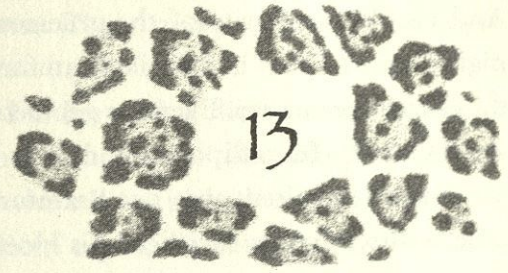
The moist air carried smells of wood smoke and of humans with their genders idetifiable. A frisky dragonfly zoomed down the road. A catfish jumped in the air, its splash echoing in her head.

How much louder and clearer these natural sounds were than her father's conversation had been, though he had stood only a few feet away. She could not recall anything in the research she had done for her father to explain this phenomena. Did Bramford experience the world in the same way?

In the whole world, he was the only one who would understand her, the only possible mate for her. At last, they were two of a kind. The overwhelming urge to see him sent her running towards the steps when a powerful smell hit her. Eden reared up and looked straight to the source. There, in front of the temple of war, stood a carved jaguar statue, and on a spike at the top, Yolo's head.

In a mad rush, cruel memories swept over Eden like a turning tide. She stumbled back, her heart hammering. She would never forget this nasty piece of the past.

And now the Jaguar Girl could avenge her friend's death!



13

THE SICKENING IMAGE of Yolo's head on a pike fed Eden's murderous rage. She stormed Tezcatlipoca's temple and threw over his gaudy throne, which landed on the stone slabs with a screeching crash that added to her furious growl.

She would kill him and the rest of those bastards too.

Eden swept into a dark hallway, heading towards the sound of a crackling fire. A sentry smiled as she entered, and sweeping aside a curtain made from a jaguar's pelt, admitted her to the inner sanctum. The gracious welcome puzzled her, as if she had been expected.

As Eden entered a round windowless room with four columns, the scent of blood whetted her appetite. Even better, it was Tezcatlipoca's blood. The once great god of war lay limp on a narrow cot beside the fire with his eyes closed. His jaguar cape fell to the sides, revealing sharp spikes of the maguey plant, *Agave americana,* stuck into his arms and legs. Blood streamed from the puncture wounds into skull-shaped pots that lined the floor, the *plink, plink, plink* echoing in the spare sanctuary.

The blood, along with the man's vulnerability, drove Eden to the edge. She wanted to rip him into small pieces.

And yet the similarity of the gruesome scene to the chilling nightmare she had had while Bramford took his shamanistic flight gave her pause. Even the geometric pattern of succulent spikes across Tezcatlipoca's body was the same.

But this penitent was not Bramford. And what did Eden care if Tezcatlipoca sacrificed his blood, even to the point of death?

A log snapped in the fire, and as a bright flame revealed the back wall, Eden gasped at the sight of the Jaguar Man depicted in a same pose as Tezcatlipoca.

Exactly like her dream.

From the faded red paint and nicks in the wall, she guessed that the picture had been painted long ago, perhaps centuries. But unlike the stylized images of the Aztec calendar, the resemblance to the beastly man she loved was unmistakable. How could the Aztecs have known that Bramford would arrive on their doorstep in the far future?

Even more mystifying, a blond, blue-eyed girl stooped over him, collecting the blood that spilled from his body. With a shudder Eden realized that the girl looked like her. Not the Jaguar Girl she had become, but her Pearl likeness.

"Impossible," she said.

Of course the girl in the painting might just as well have been Rebecca. Once, her portrait had convinced Eden that they could have been sisters. Although they shared an undeniable physical resemblance, Eden had come to learn that their personalities were polar opposites.

In any case Rebecca posed no threat; the FFP had killed her when she failed to help them capture Bramford. And since Eden would never harm him, she dismissed the primitive drawings as nonsense. These tricksters must have aged the painting.

Tezcatlipoca glanced at her with a flicker of recognition, as he began to mutter in a monotonous tone. His gaze drifted to the nearest column, where Eden picked out the neat rows of pictograms drawn from top to bottom. Each line—and there were hundreds—contained the symbol of the jaguar interspersed with images of war and death. Grasping for understanding, she gave Tezcatlipoca a searching look.

With a weary sigh the bleeding deity turned to the next column, which told a similar gory story, and continued mumbling. He was reading each line aloud, Eden realized, the way a recalcitrant schoolboy recited his errors as a form of punishment.

A sudden intense burst of heat emanated from the hallway, heralding the entrance of the sun god. How did he do that, anyway? Huitzilopochtli smiled at Eden like one friend meeting another on a picture-perfect sunny day.

She growled under her breath. *First, find out what's going on. Then kill him.*

The hateful astrologer who had cut out Yolo's heart stepped up beside Huitzilopochtli. He showed less enthusiasm than his boss at the sight of Eden.

She could have killed them all, the guard too. So why weren't they afraid?

As if in response to her thought, Huitzilopochtli and his henchman looked at the pitiful image of Bramford bleeding to death. As Eden followed their gaze, the sun god murmured with encouragement. *That's it; you're heading in the right direction.*

Eden shook her head, uncomprehending.

"Xochipilli," he said, pointing at her.

She swept a padded hand across her inhuman body. "Even now? You think I'm the goddess of love?"

Huitzilopochtli's radiant smile moved though all her defenses and left her giddy. She stepped back, overcome by unfamiliar exuberance. His laugh boomed in the confines of the room and sent the fire climbing.

He nodded and called her, *"Xochipilli Ocelotl."*

"The Jaguar Goddess," Eden translated.

Once more she studied the recorded images of so many wars that had wrecked the environment. The sun burned too brightly, killing legions of people; and yet war soldiered on, increasing hatred among the races as each fought for survival. The Aztec's system for apportioning worship to the many gods had failed. As her father had said, the result would be disastrous.

—Without spiritual balance, the Aztecs feared a great war would end the world.

"Okay," Eden said, turning back to the sun god, "war must end or mankind will die. But what does that have to do with me?"

He gave a searing look at her likeness standing over Bramford's dying body, until Eden finally got it, though the answer seemed incredible.

"Because I represent love," she said. "I must subdue Bramford—the Jaguar Man who represents war? To create balance at last?"

Huitzilopochtli waited patiently, the sun poised in a cerulean blue clear sky. There was more to learn.

But Eden did not like where his plan was leading. She jabbed an accusing finger in the air. "Your people prophesied the coming of the Jaguar Man—to save you and your lands."

The sun god's impatient sigh sent a scorching blast of heat in her direction that loosened her resistance and sent her words tumbling out. "But that didn't mean Bramford would live. You expect me to end war, which means...you want me to kill Bramford?"

At last Huitzilopochtli glowed with pleasure, while the astrologer basked in his warmth.

Eden laughed at the absurdity. "Why would I hurt the one I love? Do you think I care for power? For Earth's sake, aren't Bramford and I getting married?"

With firm conviction the astrologer repeated the proclamation he had made to announce her wedding date.

"So my marriage will take place. But if you think I'll obey you, or anyone else, you're mistaken. I'm a she-cat now."

Just in case they misunderstood, Eden let out a curdling roar that shook the walls. She smiled to herself, delighted to produce such awe-inspiring sounds.

Huitzilopochtli closed his eyes, like the sun slipping behind gray clouds. There would be no more illumination today.

What did she care about a ridiculous prophecy? Fear belonged in the past. And Rebecca's dirty old dress, too.

Eden crossed the room and yanked down the hanging jaguar pelt. "I'll take this."

She knotted it around her shoulders, and without another word for her would-be conspirators, swept outside. Again the awful sight of Yolo's head impaled on a pike stopped Eden

in her tracks. With great care she loosened her poor friend's head and tucked it under her arm.

Eden's legs moved like finely tuned pistons as she took the pyramid steps. Running across the central square, she got lost in the vivid details of the world around her. From out in the farmland the colorful song of the common clay-colored yiguirro, *Turdus grayi,* sounded like a symphony. A spiny pocket mouse, *Heteromys catopterius,* burrowed under a pile of rubble where an adobe house had once stood, its cheek pouches stuffed with seeds.

How the old Eden, who had labored over research material, would have relished this effortless inflow of data. Lost and blind, how had her former self coped?

Finally Eden reached the jungle. *Home, at last.* A tumult of animal shrieks and groaning cries greeted her. With a sharp laugh she recalled the arrogant boast Bramford had once made.

This is my world now!

Under the shade of a large kapok tree, she dug a hole. Emotion welled up inside of her, as she buried Yolo's head in the ground. But like a fine breeze, her sadness passed. In its place Eden felt love and gratitude for the human girl she had known.

Thank you, Mother Earth.

In response a voice whispered in the soft brush of air against her spotted skin.

You are part of me.

Eden turned her beastly face to the upper canopy, where swarms of butterflies waltzed among shafts of sunlight. Was she nothing more? Had she no real say in her fate?

Again the soft but powerful voice filled her like water pouring into a vessel. Eden could not grasp the message, though she liked the peaceful feeling it carried. If wise men failed to understand the riddle of life, how could she? But then, perhaps a new type of creature, with new ways of seeing the world, could perceive the truth. Didn't she sense the love that connected everything, as Aunt Emily had suggested.

With great relief Eden realized that she had not forgotten Emily Dickinson's poems, one of few human memories she cherished. In fact, she felt closer to her adopted aunt than ever. Perhaps, as Emily and Eden's mother had believed, she would find the answers to life if she looked with her heart.

This world is not conclusion;
A sequel stands beyond,
Invisible, as music,
But positive, as sound.
It beckons and it baffles;
Philosophies don't know,
And through a riddle, at the last,
Sagacity must go.

It was time to begin her new life and find her mate. Eden's sharp vision picked out the surest route across the byways of tree branches, as if neon lit the shadowy recesses. Leaping forward, she calculated the distance from one branch to the next. She did not even consider the perilous fall if she failed to reach her mark. She just knew what to do.

A startling possibility came to Eden: a four-legged she-cat? Why not, she decided with glee.

Her long arms reached forward, her haunches wound tight, as she crouched on all fours. Her padded hands and feet cushioned each step, gaining traction. The sharp nails grabbed the tree. The sultry air moved whisper fast across her streamlined body, cooling her churning heat. The scenery whizzed past, her cape flying behind her.

Despite her speed, or maybe because of it, her mind calmed, as still as a glassy pond. Just like her Huaorani friends, who never expended needless energy, Eden moved with the Earth, not against it.

Then, from the forest floor, a squeaky call reached her: a young tapir. Happily, Eden had also retained her immense trove of data on flora and fauna. To her surprise, came the added knowledge of how the pig-like herbivore would taste—warm, salty, and fatty—and her sudden ravenous desire to eat it.

On cat's feet, Eden crept down a tree trunk, sniffing out her prey. The jungle noise dimmed as creatures contracted into holes or bogs at her stealthy approach. With little effort she siphoned off the precise amount of needed energy, which rippled up and down her lithe body as she lunged—she had never felt so alive!

The tapir huddled in the shadows, its small dark eyes plaintive. It had lost its mother, Eden realized. The pitiful thought slowed her for a moment, but could not halt her machine-like advance.

She attacked with a determined roar, almost as surprised as her target. As her steel-like jaws clamped onto the tapir's neck, it raised its snout into the air and sputtered a death rattle. Warm blood exploded into Eden's mouth, sending

her into a violent frenzy. No thought. No consequence. She simply acted like the great predator she had become and devoured her meal.

The jungle cacophony gradually resumed as her hunger abated. Its occupants were safe until Eden's next hunger pang struck.

Sitting back on her heels, she suddenly saw the picture she presented to the world: a barbaric hybrid girl in blood-stained garments, her shoulders covered with an animal skin, her hands and mouth dripping with blood.

For Earth's sake, she was a savage beast!

Eden flung away the tapir's remains and jumped to her feet. Her panicked gaze skittered through the forest, searching for something. But she would never find her human identity again, she realized.

Remnants of her former self clung to her, just like Rebecca's tattered clothes. Both made Eden uncomfortable. She wanted to leave the past behind once and for all.

She tore off the skirt and blouse and stamped them into the loamy ground. Untying the knot at her neck, Eden swirled the jaguar pelt around her like a toreador flourishing his cape. Around and around she spun, reveling in her naked dance, her deep laugh reverberating in the trees.

Coming to a stop, Eden ripped the pelt in two. She fashioned a short skirt around her hips and bound her breasts with the other remnant. Examining her outfit, she smiled with satisfaction.

That's better.

A high-pitched *ahh-eee* echoed approval. She had company. A brown-throated three-toed sloth, *Bradypus variegatus*,

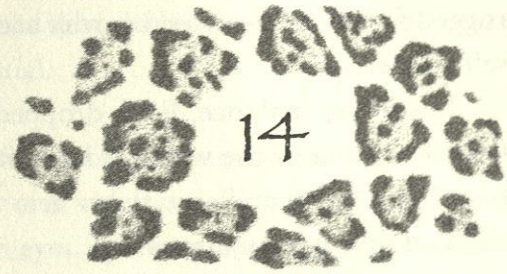
hung upside down from a cow tree, rotating its neck ninety degrees to view her from several angles like a fashion designer studying his latest creation. The cat-sized creature seemed to smile, though the shape of its mouth gave that impression.

Eden bowed in its direction. "Why, thank you, Sir."

As she rose she caught the glint of ominous eyes watching her from a distance. Her blood fired. Was it the FFP? She doubted whether she could fight their laser guns single-handedly.

Then the unmistakable growl of a big cat sent a chill up her spine. Recalling the sighting of a jaguar at Heaven's Gate, Eden wondered if this was the same predator. If only she had more experience.

In a flash, she bolted into the heavy brush. Behind her, she heard the enemy crash through the woods in pursuit. Her body strained for speed. Earth forbid, Eden's first day as a she-cat would be her last!



14

EDEN'S FEET barely touched the ground as she fled from her pursuer. She raced along the branches, blood drumming in her ears. Her panicked flight shamed her; she was a she-cat now. And yet, she need time to grow accustomed to her new state.

Even now, inexperience cost Eden several vital seconds as she hesitated at the end of a branch, considering her options. Beneath her, a wide stream coursed past rocky cliffs, one of the many tributaries that dangled like rusted charms from the bracelet of the dying Amazon River.

She might escape downstream, but water had always terrified the old Eden. And yet, her new cousins, the jaguar and the anaconda, were good swimmers. Or she might leap across to the opposite shore, unless she fell onto the rocks and ended up as dinner, or worse, scientific research material.

The branch creaked with the sudden thud of the enemy's weight. She leapt into the air when a loud shout startled her. "Eden!"

Bramford?

Turning her head, she caught a glimpse of him among the waxy leaves. A curious expression flickered across his

rugged face. For Earth's sake, why hadn't he announced himself sooner?

Losing her balance, Eden dropped to the river in a belly flop. The sting of the water did not hurt half as much as the humiliation. Unfamiliar with her new weight or how to swim, she sank like a heavy stone.

Then instinct took over. Her powerful legs pushed off the river bottom. She shot to the surface and looked up, just as Bramford's sinewy body arced high in the air. With his arms extended, his thick legs taut with power, he made a perfect dive. Treading water, Eden drank in his magnificent form.

Bramford sliced through the water with hardly a splash and grabbed her legs. As his hands slid up to her hips her heart pounded in anticipation of meeting face-to-face. At last she would see his reaction to Eden the she-cat.

His head crowned the water, and he scooped her into an embrace. Eden held very still as his eyes locked onto hers. His steely expression gave nothing away. Not even a smile.

Did regret lurk in the depths of his being? Did he wish she still resembled her old self or—the idea burned in her chest—Rebecca? Even more, Eden resented her abrupt slide from queen of the jungle to insecure sweetheart.

Maybe he needed a minute for the shock to subside.

"Hello." She purred.

"Hi," Bramford said with no trace of disappointment or elation.

Pushing back, he floated downstream, carrying her on his chest. This was nice.

Eden draped her arms around his shoulders, waiting for the words she longed to hear. Still he made no comment on

her appearance, while she thought he never had looked more appealing, or more bestial.

Just my type.

Rivulets of water flowed over his broad shoulders. The afternoon sun slanted over the treetops, casting a shine to the golden flecks in his eyes. His long hair, wet and tangled, pressed around the slash of cheekbones.

Eden could barely control the lusty urge to nip at Bramford. But she wouldn't give in. Not unless he wanted her.

"Why didn't you tell me it was you?" she said.

Bramford shrugged. "I wanted to see what you were capable of."

"You were testing me? Is that it?"

"Why not? If we're going to live together, I need to know I can count on you."

If? With one choice word he undermined her tender hopes. Had she been a fool to believe in his earnest promise?

—You will be even more beautiful to me because you'll be mine.

"You should have thought of that before I adapted," Eden said icily.

His dark forehead creased. "How could I? I had no idea what you'd be like."

Teeth bared, she lunged for Bramford's neck. His yelp sounded more surprised than hurt when she broke the skin. As he wiped his finger across the bite and saw blood a furious gleam came into his eyes.

Uh-oh.

Roaring, Bramford threw Eden onto the embankment. She scrambled up the shore, but he caught her ankle like a

cowboy lassoing a wild filly. Down she fell, her face mashed in the wet sand as he dragged her to him. He flipped her over with a loud grunt. The sun formed a halo around his towering figure and gave him a celestial glow.

"When did you get to be such a hothead?" Bramford bellowed.

Eden glared at him. "When you lied to me!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The instant he released her leg she rammed into him and knocked him to the ground. Her nails raked down his chest. Bramford eyed the blooming red welts. And so did Eden. They looked at each other in surprise.

For a moment, time stood still. Even the jungle hushed, as though its denizens also puzzled over her strength. The male of the species dominated, didn't it?

Nevertheless, he was the Jaguar Man. His deadly look cooled her blood, and made the challenge clear. She would submit, or else.

Enraged, Eden rolled away from him. In a flash Bramford pinned her beneath him. "Have you gone insane, woman?"

Had she? Everything she knew to be true had turned upside-down. Even her body now tingled with a strange, bursting sensation that made her think of a root reaching into the ground.

"I don't know," Eden said with a sigh. "I just don't know."

"Hmmm," he murmured. "It's confusing, isn't it?"

She nodded, fighting the press of hot tears. She wanted him to choose her, not from lack of options, but from love.

"I understand," Bramford said. "Just give it time. You'll get used to it."

But would he get used to her?

Eden hissed. "I don't need your pity."

A small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Some she-cat," he said. "I always suspected you would be. Though I admit you surprised me."

He slid to her side, his arm draped across her hip. At last they fit together: a jaguar couple, two of a kind. The top of Eden's head nearly met Bramford's brow, and her lean, feline body molded to his with perfect symmetry.

His luminous eyes held her gaze as he continued. "You left me speechless. Just like the first time I saw you."

"Because I resembled Rebecca?"

"Because I wanted you from the beginning, even if I fought to be free of you."

"And now?"

Bramford purred, and as a look of vulnerability softened his features, Eden pressed against him. He desired her, no question about it.

"Now you're mine," he said. "That's all I've ever wanted. We belong together. And for as long as we have, I'm yours."

Eden's body flushed with heat as his lips met hers. Bramford kissed her, deep and long, until she gave up a throaty moan. As he traced her neck to her breast, his tongue kindling a flame, she melted into his embrace.

"We're getting married tomorrow," she said dreamily.

"It's the next step," he said.

The last time Bramford had convinced Eden of that, her best friend had died. She jerked away from him and said, "They cut out Yolo's heart, like plucking ripe fruit from a tree. So that I could adapt." She searched his eyes. "Did you know it would happen?"

His voice was a soft caress. "I'm sorry, I know you cared for her."

"Then you knew?"

"It was a possibility. It has been their custom, after all."

True, Eden could not blame him for that. Still, there was more. In a worried voice she described the pictures of the Jaguar Man and a blond girl that she had seen on Tezcatlipoca's temple wall. "What does it mean?"

Bramford shrugged. "It's an allegory, I suppose. Wouldn't you agree that love must conquer war if mankind is to survive?"

"Yes, but—"

"As long as we play our parts, Eden, it will be fine."

"But I won't play a part in their sick plan. And neither should you. We're free now—look at us. I'm not a Pearl anymore." She threw open her arms as if to say, "Look at me."

Inch by inch, Bramford's gaze traveled over her body. And yet his expression remained impassive, his judgment reserved. Eden began to wonder if his noble character forced him to accept her, no matter what he thought of her new look.

His comments did little to assuage her worry. "Yes, you've changed. More than I expected."

Me, too. But she kept that to herself.

Eden settled down on the ground, at odds with her immense power and the vulnerable feelings he inspired. She

had hoped things between them would be simpler once she adapted.

Bramford also seemed to wage an inner struggle, as his features tensed. Finally he spoke with compassion and warning. "When I first adapted, I wanted to run into the jungle and indulge every wild impulse. But there was my son, who needed me. And I needed you."

She softened towards him. "Carmen says she won't allow Logan to adapt."

"I can't force him. Didn't you say so?"

Did she? It seemed ages ago. Eden looked out at the river, her thoughts shifting out of reach like the rippling water. If only she could hold on to something solid.

"I swore that I would be a good father, just as my father was," Bramford continued. "Of course, Logan's albinism presented a great obstacle. His mother's absence was also difficult, not for me, but the boy missed her. His pain reminded me of when my mother left my father." He paused with a sigh. "I often wonder whether I'll ever understand why my mother left, or whether I'll be glad on my deathbed that I knew nothing more."

Eden kept very still—finally he was sharing! In fact he had revealed more about himself in the last few minutes than since they fell in love almost a month ago. Was it because they were now the same kind, or was this his usual cryptic way of hinting at something larger? She waited breathlessly for him to say more.

Bramford shot her a penetrating look, then quickly averted his eyes. "You didn't know about my mother?"

She shook her head and whispered, "Tell me."

"How could you know? It cost plenty of credits to wipe my personal history from the World Band."

Eden imagined a beautiful Coal. "What was she like?"

"I hardly remember her," Bramford said sadly. "I was three when she left, the same age as Logan when Rebecca left. Memory is its own master. "When I think of her, I can only recall odd bits—trivial things."

"Like what?"

"She had this particular scent. I've never smelled it since. Not even here, with all these exotic smells. It was more bitter than sweet. I asked my father about it once, and he admitted that she smoked cigarettes."

"Tobacco? Really?" It was worth more than oxy, if you could find it. Even before the Great Meltdown it had been banned, its sale a criminal offense. "How on Sweet Earth did she get it?" Eden asked.

"Most likely on the black market." Bramford sounded wistful as he went on. "I wish I could remember something nice about my mother instead, like her laugh or her smile."

"Aren't there any pictures of her?"

"My father destroyed every trace of her when she left. He wouldn't allow anyone to ever speak of her. Not even me. 'That's a closed subject, Son,' he would say."

"How sad."

"We all cope with pain in different ways. Eventually he took another woman, an Amber. Of course Dawn could never be his official mate, since my mother was still alive."

Eden thought of Bramford's loyal bodyguard, half Coal, half Amber. "Shen's mother?"

Bramford nodded. "We pretended that Dawn worked for

my father, that she had been raped in the tunnels—a common enough occurrence. It was for the best, though I think it confused Shen. My father treated him well, and he's truly a brother to me."

She recalled the one-child policy. "He's lucky he wasn't killed."

"Someone rich like my father could buy off the Uni-Gov. We only hid Shen's identity so he would never be used against me, for both our sakes." Bramford looked at Eden under his brow with a guilty expression. "I'm ashamed to say: I suspect my father belonged to the FFP."

Eden gasped, an involuntary reaction that she wished she could undo. "Well, that doesn't reflect badly on you," she was quick to add.

"The sins of the father are visited on the sons. Isn't that what the ancients said? But not for Logan—not if I can help it. I've done everything in my power to protect him. He will adapt. And his little girlfriend…?"

He hesitated with that faraway look in his eyes that he wore as a shaman. When he spoke again he sounded hopeful. "I don't see why Carmen couldn't join us, if her family agrees."

All at once Eden remembered her hasty decision to let Kevon adapt, along with Bramford's warning:

— Only you and Logan will adapt—no one else. We must be the only jaguar people, if war is to end.

For Earth's sake, what had she done? Her sudden independence and power had gone to her head. The temptation to confess teased her tongue, but she shook it off. Bramford would find out soon enough. Why spoil the moment?

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"I was wondering about your father," Eden replied hastily, which was true enough.

"He was killed in a terrorist attack. A Pearl group claimed responsibility. I was eighteen, Shen just shy of fourteen, when it happened.

"Oh." Her breath rushed out. "I'm so sorry, Ronson."

More than ever, she understood how many emotional hurdles this important Coal must have leapt over to fall in love with a lowly Pearl.

Bramford let out a deep breath, and said, "It doesn't matter now. But in those days I was angry. History repeats itself. My mother left, so did Logan's."

A chill touched Eden's heart. And would Logan's father be killed too?

"I'd never abandon our child," she said. "No matter what."

He looked at her with concern. "We each have a mission in life. It would be selfish to stand in the way of that. Part of my mission is to love you."

"Do you?" Her voice caught in her throat. "Love me like this?"

Bramford ran his hand over her shoulder and down her side, trailing heat and desire. "I told you, Eden. You're more beautiful than ever."

Like a sudden storm, her passion broke loose and she kissed Bramford hard on the mouth. He responded with a lusty mew that drove her over the edge. She bit his lower lip and pushed him flat against the ground.

His eyes flashed in surprise, though he didn't resist her

advance. He simply laughed with delight and groaned, as she drew a line with her tongue under his neck.

"I want you," Eden said.

Suddenly Bramford threw her aside and shot to his feet.

"What?" she said, in a burst of temper. "So you only like it when you're in charge?"

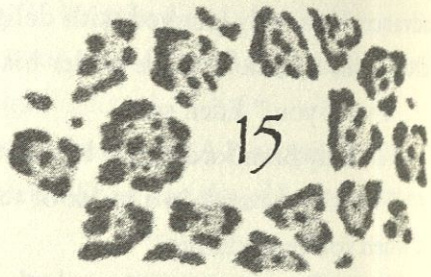
He held up a warning finger. "Stay calm."

A small army of Aztec warriors stepped out from the shadows and surrounded them. The casual way in which they held their weapons failed to disguise their seriousness.

The only escape route was to the river. "Bramford," she said, jerking her head towards it.

He chose a more positive interpretation of the event. "The wedding party has arrived."

Well, why not play along? More than anything, Eden wanted to marry Bramford.



15

A TROPICAL RAIN tapped the leaves of the forest canopy like a xylophone played with soft mallets. Eden walked hand in hand with Bramford, easily now that they were a pair of Jaguar people. And this would have been their first romantic stroll, if not for the unwanted escorts.

She watched the lead warrior pass under a ribbon of water that cascaded from the leaves and ran down his back, and felt nothing but resentment for him. Already Eden regretted her decision to submit to these humans. As if she were a mere girl.

"Why should we do as—"

Bramford cut her off. "The children's lives are at stake." He winced as if it had cost him to reveal that much. "Think about it."

Eden drew in a sharp breath. Would these barbarians sacrifice Carmen or Etelvina, or even Logan, just as they had done to Yolo?

"I told you," Bramford added, "it will be fine as long as we play our parts." He smiled gamely. "We're getting married; isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yes, but not if it means someone will die for it." The

memory of their images painted on the temple wall turned in her gut like a worm on a hook. "Like you, for example."

"You mean the bloodletting? It doesn't necessarily kill."

"Not necessarily?"

"It's an ancient religious rite."

Eden shook her head in frustration. "But how can it be? How could they have painted our pictures long ago?"

"I suppose one of their shamans brought back information from the future. Remember, the future isn't set. If we stay on the right course, we'll be protected. Do you think I would let any harm come to you?"

"No," she said, more grudgingly than intended.

"Try to think of those images as part of a larger truth. For example, you slay me with love." Bramford gave her a tender look. "My father used to say that, once upon a time, love made the world go 'round, until greed and hatred stopped it. Maybe we can bring love back."

"That love is all there is, / Is all we know of love." At his quizzical look, Eden explained. "Lines from my mother's favorite poem by Emily Dickinson. It seems like your father and my mother had a lot in common."

"And so do we. Don't ever forget that."

The breeze off the lake began to cool the muggy heat. Any minute they would reach the edge of the forest. A hungry chestnut-collared swift, *Cypseloides rutilus,* dove past, chasing after a flying queen ant on its nuptial flight. As the bird and its prey disappeared into a bank of light, Eden hoped her own wedding night would not be as fraught with danger.

She feared she might not have another chance to talk

with Bramford before their marriage took place. Already, the sounds of the village intruded.

"Let's make one thing clear," she said. "I'm not going to sacrifice you or myself for the greater good. I don't care about the fate of the Pearls or the rest of the world. I only want to be with you."

If Eden had expected reassurance, Bramford failed to provide it. "We shall each have to sacrifice something," he said. "That's natural in relationships. To gain something great, one must always give up some ground."

She had already lost her best friend. What else would be asked of her?

"Do you trust me or not, Eden?"

Despite having reached her goal of adaptation, she still struggled with her response. Something unexpected had shifted inside her, a fundamental way of looking at life that created a different sort of gap between them.

Bramford's expression hardened as the moment wore on.

Finally Eden acknowledged him, though her words had a hollow ring. "I do trust you."

"I hope so."

Just as she expected, the warriors separated them at the edge of the plaza. Meztli waited for her at the end of her street, while the lead guide pointed Bramford in the opposite direction.

"When will I see you?" Eden said, standing firm.

"Tomorrow at twilight." Bramford grinned. "At the altar."

She saw right through his false bravado. He was worried too. As she looked deep into his eyes, his smile faded. In that

moment, without a single word or warm touch, she felt closer to him than ever before.

"Till then, my love," he said.

He waited for her to leave first, and she felt the heat of his gaze on her back as she crossed the square. Nothing could ever separate them, especially a ridiculous prophecy.

Meztli turned to walk with Eden down the street, a warrior following behind. Ahead, a rainbow of dazzling hues arched across the evening sky. In twenty-four hours Eden would be married.

Me, Eden Newman, once an ugly Pearl, wed to the Jaguar Man!

The thought of her honeymoon heightened her anticipation. Like a young bird eager to leave the nest yet terrified by the inevitable jump, she feared the moment when she and Bramford would finally become lovers.

She reminded herself that for eons other brides had faced that crossroads with equal joy and temerity. Of course they had been girls, not she-cats. Eden would be the first of her kind to lose her virginity. Still, the feeling of female solidarity comforted her all the same.

She had to crouch to fit into Meztli's house, and sadness floated over Eden like flotsam down a stream as she entered. Poor Yolo would never fall in love or have wedding jitters.

Her mother stood in silent contemplation at the family altar. Eden recalled the proud manner in which she had prepared her daughter for death. Did the greater good still seem like a sufficient trade-off?

All alone, Eden made her way to the steam room. As she stripped bare, the fire warmed her skin. She ran a hand down

her arm, amazed by the soft patches of hair. How different she was from the last time she had been here with Yolo.

And yet her memories of her friend had not dimmed. She could almost hear Yolo's sad humming echo from the walls. When Eden sloshed water onto the walls, grief caught her at last. She sank down onto the floor and wept bitter tears.

Would she have chosen to adapt if she had known the steep price her friend would pay? She wished she could say no, but she had her doubts.

"I'm sorry," Eden murmured.

Somehow she must repay Yolo. Wiping her tears away, she stared into the mist. From outside the pained squeak of a mouse followed the aggressive cry of a raptor. Each played its part in the circle of life.

And so must I. For Yolo's sake.

Eden noticed a shift in the air when she awoke the next morning to a burst of sweet-smelling flowers that floated in through the back door. She marveled at the precision of the Aztec calendar: Xochipilli's week of honor had begun.

Except for Meztli stirring in the kitchen, the house was quiet. Eden wondered where María and the others were. Before she could ask, her hostess pressed the usual morning drink of spicy chocolate into her hands.

Eden would have preferred a nice fatty tapir or a juicy deer. But she couldn't refuse the drink; it must have cost a small fortune. In the Aztec empire one cacao bean had traded for a large tomato, thirty for a small rabbit.

The kind woman patted her stomach with what sounded like approval, as Eden drained the cup. All at once Eden understood that the copious amounts of chocolate must act like a fertility drug!

"Oh," she said, patting her stomach in imitation. "You're hoping I'll get pregnant?"

Meztli nodded with enthusiasm.

Back in the tunnels, conception was never left to chance. If a woman didn't conceive naturally within three months, the health department implanted her womb with a pre-made embryo. A special class of Coal donors, selected for the best genes, provided the eggs and sperm. Eden stared at the dregs in the cup, mulling over the Aztecs' primitive methods. Perhaps with progress something had been lost: the simple balance of nature.

A sharp knock at the door called their attention. Meztli crossed the room and opened it with a welcoming greeting. María and Lucy stood outside in the soft early light. Carlito hung on his mother's hip, and the two sisters pressed Logan between them.

Eden's heart leapt at the sight of her friends. But as she stepped forward, María looked in alarm to the side, where a menacing trio of warriors waited. Eden's predatory instinct flared. She sank low onto her hips with a curdling growl, ready to leap.

The soldiers aimed their spears at the children, who shrieked. María begged Eden to stop. *"¡Por Dios, párete!"*

It took every ounce of willpower for Eden to restrain her impulses. The rush for the kill pounded in her body. Only the children's frightened cries provided a counterweight. She couldn't she risk their safety.

Her growl turned into a questioning snarl. She stepped

back, her chest heaving. The soldiers relaxed their weapons. Meztli hurried the women and children inside and closed the door with a heavy sigh.

Eden's voice filled with dread as she inquired about María's husband and brother-in-law. *"¿Dónde están Lorenzo y Charlie?"*

"En la cárcel," María replied.

Prison? Oh, Sweet Earth.

"And Austin?" Why hadn't her faithful dog guarded the kids?

María explained that a family of farmers beyond the village was taking care of Austin. Lorenzo and Charlie would be released after the wedding, she believed.

Bramford was right; the children's lives were at stake. Again Eden failed to make sense of it. What did the Aztecs want from her?

María reached up to place a comforting hand on her shoulder. Eden had always been taller, but now she towered over her. She searched her friend's face for any distasteful reaction to her beastly form. As usual, Maria only offered acceptance.

"Te vas a casar hoy. Está bien," she said.

"Yes, I'm getting married today, it will be fine," Eden repeated robotically.

Everyone seemed to agree. Then why did Eden feel as though they were hurtling towards their doom? For the children's sake, she pretended it wasn't true.

At her playful growl, they squealed with delight. Carmen led the way, of course, sinking onto all fours and growling in return. Etelvina and Logan followed suit. Any distance

Eden's transformation presented evaporated in a fit of giggles on both sides.

And there were wedding presents! The sisters produced handfuls of pretty white trillium flowers from their pockets. An accomplished artist, Logan unveiled a painting of Eden and Bramford in which they walked through the forest, a pair of happy cat people.

"Gracias," Eden said, overcome with emotion.

She happily submitted to the children's determined ministrations. The girls combed out her long hair, braiding it with the delicate flowers. With his old paint set, Logan made up Eden's face.

The pleasant sounds of the women, who chatted while they worked in the kitchen, dampened her anxieties. The bustle of their neighbors in the communal yard filtered through the open back door. The heat of the day began to warm the air. Eden could almost convince herself that this was a normal day and she an ordinary bride preparing for her wedding.

But not quite.

Now Meztli presented her with a cotton blouse woven from the fibers of that all-purpose plant, the maguey, which gave it a remarkably supple feel. It must have taken weeks to create the beautiful garment with its intricate geometric embroidery and sapphire blue color. Eden was glad the blouse fit, and tucked it into the skirt she had fashioned from the jaguar pelt. Turning around for her friends, she smiled shyly.

"Una novia extraordinaria," María said.

Indeed, an extraordinary bride. If only Eden's mother, who had loved to watch Holo-Images of weddings, could see her now. Eden suddenly recalled an old world adage that sup-

posedly brought brides good luck: something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. How innocent life must have been in those days.

Well, her wedding blouse was blue, but what about the rest? Aha, she thought as her gaze came to rest on the corn-husk doll of Xochipilli. What better object to borrow than something Yolo had treasured?

Eden reached for it with a questioning look at Meztli. After a brief hesitation, the woman nodded.

"Xochipilli," she said.

Eden pantomimed her intent. "I'll return it, of course." Then she tucked the doll into her skirt.

From a jar that sat on the altar Meztli drew out a spine of the maguey plant. She gave a little cry as she pricked her thumb—the spine was sharp enough to pierce the bone. Then she held her hand over a small gray wooden bowl engraved with flowers to catch the trickle of blood. Last of all, she bowed before the painting of Xochipilli.

She glanced at Eden. *See? This is how it's done.*

Although the maguey spines reminded Eden of the ghastly prophetic images of Bramford's sacrifice, she could not refuse her generous hostess. "Okay," she said.

But when Eden tried to prick her finger, the spine crumbled against her thick skin. With a nervous laugh she selected a larger spine. This time she succeeded, though the cut did not hurt at all. Dark red blood oozed from the wound.

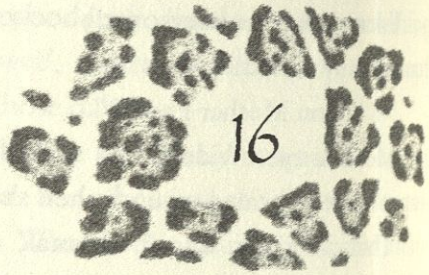
Meztli slid the carved bowl under Eden's hand with a word of approval. A few drops of blood fell onto the gray wood. And then nothing more.

Eden turned her hand over, shocked to see that the wound had already closed.

"What on Mother Earth?"

Meztli's eyes widened in disbelief. Peering close, she tapped Eden's healed wound, then shrank back in fright.

This definitely wasn't normal, even for a hybrid human. And Eden had a terrible, sneaking suspicion what had happened.



16

THE SUN HAD dipped behind the temples by the time Eden reached the top of the pyramid. She had not even broken a sweat during the steep climb. In fact her muscles vibrated with energy to spare. Recalling Bramford's recent run up the steps, she knew that, in a race, she would win. Adding her strength against him by the river, and the abnormal healing of her puncture wound, she suspected the worst.

The Jaguar Girl is faster, stronger and somehow different from the Jaguar Man?

She swept into the makeshift lab in Xochipilli's temple where she found her father absorbed in writing. He sat with his back to her, his shirt stained with sweat, oblivious to anything else, including her.

From long ago a memory surfaced in Eden's mind. She had taken great pride in her detailed research on the general subject of raptors. Yet when she had presented it to her father, he had not been satisfied and snapped at her.

—But I must have the complete genome sequence of Harpia harpyja*!*

—I'll try, Father.

Eden had left him there, bent over his work. Trudging

home, she pondered her failure. What would it take to please him? If only he had asked for what he wanted, she would have complied. She couldn't be expected to read his mind, could she?

At their home unit, Eden had found her mother standing amidst a vivid Holo-Image of the Golden Gate Bridge that peered through the mists of the twenty-first century. Like most Pearls, she had worked from home so that her presence wouldn't upset the Coal majority. And though her work as a historian for the Uni-Gov had required long hours too, she always seemed to have time for Eden.

As she had taken in Eden's dejected look, the brick red suspension bridge evaporated, just as surely as it had disappeared in time.

—What's wrong, daughter?

Eden had shrugged and cuddled up with Austin. What did feelings matter, anyway? She wouldn't think about it anymore.

But her mother, with her uncanny perceptiveness, pinpointed the problem.

—Your father has a strong purpose in his life, Daughter. That's more valuable than any amount of credits, or oxy, or even the highest mate-rate in the world.

—What's his purpose?

—If he can understand life, he believes he can change it to help people.

—Coals too?

Her mother had let out a long sigh.

—Please don't use that word, Eden. They're people just like us.

Eden didn't think *they* thought the same about Pearls, but she didn't want to argue. Instead, she had risked a more personal question.

—Does it bother you that Father cares more about his work than you or I?

—Is that what you think?

Why hadn't Eden kept her mouth shut? She had always hated these heart-to-heart conversations, which only led to labyrinths of unsolvable emotional equations. Better to stick with logic, and discard the rest.

Just then, from the outside hallway, a woman's high-pitched scream had spilt the air, followed by running footsteps. Someone shouted, "Stop!" The woman pleaded in vain for more time.

Eden would never forget the horrible sound of the laser blast that followed, or the woman's strangled death rattle. It was an awful reminder: If Eden didn't find a mate by her eighteenth birthday she would face the same deadly fate. But how would she ever overcome her dismal mate-rate?

As soon as the disturbance had passed and the usual harsh sounds of life in the tunnels filtered through the air, her mother had begun again.

—I would rather be with a poor man who has a true purpose than with an aimless rich man.

That had gotten Eden's attention.

—Really?

—It isn't good enough to simply survive, Daughter. You are too young to understand that a life without purpose can never satisfy, no matter what else you have. It's like groping in the dark and never reaching your destination. Thank Earth, your father's days are filled with purpose. It carries him past all sorts of heartaches and gross injustices.

Her mother had glanced at the door, as if to say, "Like that poor woman suffered."

For her mother's sake, Eden resisted the impulse to smash the lab to smithereens. But she could not hide the cold bitterness in her voice. "What exactly did you do to me, Father?"

He turned to face her, his eyes unnaturally bright. "Ah, Daught," he said, studying her with typical detachment. Not surprisingly, he didn't seem to notice her festive wedding attire. "I'd like to test your capacity now."

His color had improved since the day of her operation. No longer haggard, he appeared full of energy. The boiling gray liquid that cooked over the fire explained his manic appearance.

Face it: Father is an addict.

"You're using again, aren't you?" Eden said with a defeated air. "It will no longer be called Newman's Cure, but Newman's Death, if you keep this up."

Then, with chilling insight, she got it. "Oh, you didn't! You added the plant's essence to my adaptation!"

He gave her a sheepish look.

Reeling from the truth, Eden sank down onto the test bed. She searched his face for some sign of sympathy or regret, but he only gave her a blank stare.

"I trusted you with my life, Father. How could you betray me?"

"Betray?" He looked puzzled until a wave of enthusiasm

carried him away. "By now you must grasp the significance of the opportunity. I trust that in time you will come to believe in the wisdom of my decision."

Eden looked at him her in horror. "How did you get more of the plant root?"

"From the astrologer. I had anticipated a great deal of effort in communicating my request for more. To my astonishment, he walked in shortly after you burned my supply and handed me another bundle. He even lent me his ritual knife to cut them." He indicated the hearth where the gem-encrusted knife lay—the same one that had cut out Yolo's heart. "I was surprised. But then, stranger things have happened."

Eden stared at her father, her recent memories forming a silent tableau around him. Had her mother been right? Did true purpose absolve one's crimes? Yolo must have believed that her purpose justified the ultimate sacrifice. And even Aunt Emily had expressed jealously of those who had a strong purpose in live.

So proud she was to die
It made us all ashamed
That what we cherished, so unknown
To her desire seemed.

So satisfied to go
Where none of us should be,
Immediately, that anguish stooped
Almost to jealousy.

Eden simply didn't buy it. Claiming a higher purpose in life

could also be a cover for evil intentions. Hadn't the Aztecs murdered her friend in the name of spiritual balance? And Eden's father had betrayed her for the sake of evolution.

"You've ruined everything," she declared.

He looked at her with alarm. "But you appear to be in extraordinary form, Daught."

She pushed past him and stood over the boiling pot. "Yes, your precious plan succeeded. Too well, in fact. See?"

Eden picked up the ceremonial knife and, without a word of warning, slashed the blade across her wrist. At once blood spurted into the air, and almost as quickly the flow stopped as the cut closed.

"What? What?" Her father cried as he rushed to examine her arm. "Do you realize what this means?"

"Disaster," she replied, slapping away his hand.

Caught up in his excitement, he began to jot down notes as he gushed. "My preliminary hypothesis suggests that the plant's regenerative properties have lined the walls of your cells with an elasticity that heals any breakage at an unheard of rate. I strongly suspect that the invulnerability will extend to the organs and lymphatic system, thereby inhibiting disease or infection. A broken bone—" He gave her an eager look.

"Forget it," Eden said.

"If I'm right, a bone will heal as quickly as the skin. Aren't you curious?"

"You're insane!"

He laughed. "Perhaps. And you, Daught, are a goddess!

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Don't you see? The extent of your powers is unknown,

far beyond the capacity of any predator, and may increase over time. Quite a fortunate turn of events. Aaagh!" He suddenly doubled over and sank to his knees. His breathing came in ragged gasps.

"Father! Are you all right?"

He waved off her concern. "Must have some."

Eden watched in dismay as he fumbled for a syringe. He filled it with the brownish tincture and, with shaky hands, tied a piece of rope around his arm. Then he shot the needle into his vein.

"Ahh," her father moaned, as the tension in his face dissolved.

Shutting his eyes, he sank back against the bottom of the hearth. The flames created a glow around him. In a minute his head rolled to the side, and he began to snore.

He had made a pact with the devil. *Was it worth it, Father?*

For one thing, he had lost her trust. And in the process, Eden had lost the one thing she had bargained for with her humanity: equality with Bramford. Utterly disappointed, she understood that her objective had failed. Once again she and her beloved were truly different. Only now, as though they teetered upon an old-fashioned seesaw, Eden had risen to the top while he sank beneath her.

Would Bramford reject her when he understood her superiority? At the very least, he might feel robbed of his masculinity.

Eden was sick at heart. If she thought she would never again feel Bramford's arms around her, she would take that knife and pluck out her heart.

Oh, no! Her father had said that her organs could regenerate just like her skin. Which meant that she was...truly an immortal goddess? The idea stunned Eden. Death had always hovered outside her awareness like a waiting suitor. If she would live forever, she realized with dread that she must face the future alone without her mate!

Eden flung the evil knife across the room. It struck the image of Xochipilli on the wall and clattered to the floor.

This couldn't be the role that Bramford had expected her to play! But, of course, when her father had changed her adaptation, he had sent the future skittering into an unknown direction. Just like Bramford had said.

—We can change the course of the future with a single thought or action.

She shook her father awake. "You must give the drug to Bramford too. I insist!"

"What? What?" He bounced to his feet. His mood now swung to a feverish state. "Naturally, it will require regular applications—for the rest of his life. Fortunately, I have many needles."

Turn Bramford into a drug addict like him? Never.

"There has to be another way!" Eden cried in desperation.

"I'm afraid not," her father said without a trace of remorse. "The plants genes have permanently meshed with your molecular structure. Thus, you are not subject to the abrupt withdrawal or heady rush of an infusion." He stared off into space, that look of wonder on his face. "Unless, of course..."

"What is it?"

"As you may recall, my original objective involved a more moderate adaptation. Bramford's case went far beyond stage one, and therefore, I copied the same pattern in your case."

Eden groaned inwardly. The accident she had caused at REA had contributed to Bramford's advanced beastliness.

"Go on," she said with a grimace.

"Yes, well, ever since Bramford raised the idea of an advanced stage of adaptation, for example with a tail, I have continued to work on the possibility—"

"No!" she interjected.

Eden had promised Bramford that she might be ready to evolve further one day. But now a pronounced change in either one of them would only create more distance between them.

She glared at her father. "You had no right."

He bristled with annoyance. "I must say, it was no small sacrifice on my part. I had to cut down my dosage in order to leave the proper amount for both operations."

Both?

Eden looked on either side of the test bed. Shadows hid the lower half, while sunlight lit upon the far end. The sun had moved well past its zenith, the best time for an operation.

"For Earth's sake, don't tell me you gave this powerful stuff to Kevon, too?"

"But, Daught, you ordered his adaptation."

"Not like this, you crazy fool!" Her cry rattled the glass panels. "Mother was wrong. You're not trying to help people. You saw a chance to advance your own agenda and grabbed it, damn the consequences."

His mouth gaped, as hurt flooded into his eyes. For a moment a heavy silence hung between them. Eden felt old resentments resurface, and the precarious understanding they had reached here in the jungle crumbled.

Finally her father tried again. "If only you could see—"

At her furious growl, he grew quiet. Eden turned her back on him and stomped outside to the edge of the pyramid. She was just as angry with herself. Hadn't she also changed the direction of the future when she disregarded Bramford's orders and allowed Kevon to adapt?

And how would a more powerful Jaguar Man on the scene affect their fates? Beyond her personal concerns, would the imbalance between her and Bramford overshadow the greater good he spoke of?

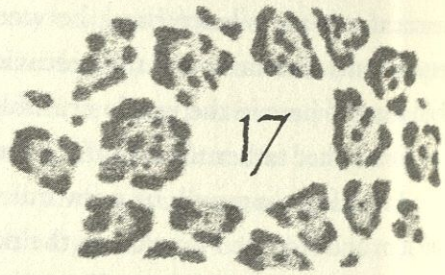
Perhaps he had glimpsed such a disastrous future. That might explain his seemingly arbitrary decision to refuse Kevon the right to adapt. A knot tightened around Eden's heart as she recalled Bramford's somber explanation.

—We must be the only jaguar people, if war is to end."

Stay calm, she told herself. The new super-cat was only Kevon, her bother and friend. She could trust him not to start a war, couldn't she?

From her bird's-eye view atop the pyramid, Eden tried to summon the lofty, powerful feelings of a goddess. Instead, she felt wretched with guilt. She must confess; Bramford had a right to know what she had become. What did she have to fear, anyway?

Only a broken heart.



17

EDEN HEADED towards Metzli's house to prepare for the wedding when she heard the sharp, throaty growl of a big cat come from the jungle. Too cocky and brash, it couldn't be Bramford. Tinged with a trace of human voice, it could not be a real jaguar. And though Eden knew about Kevon's adaptation, she found it hard to believe the mighty sound belonged to him.

Considering the supernatural abilities her father had given her and Kevon, if she were a goddess, would her adopted brother also be a god?

Maybe a teenage cat wouldn't be as strong as Eden feared. The wedding would not begin until dusk. If she hurried, she could find Kevon and test his strength.

Eden sped through the jungle on all fours, tracking the feline sound she had heard. She soon spied Kevon standing in a shaft of light that strafed through the tall kapok trees. The newly minted teenage Jaguar Boy stared at his hands, turning them over, just as she had done when she adapted. More than the other changes, her thickened hands had taken her aback. No longer dainty or feminine, they could crush a man's skull.

Oh, well, that could be useful.

Like Eden, Kevon had not achieved the pitch-black color of their black jaguar cousin, though he was darker than her. Half of his DNA, either from a Coal mother or father, had worked in his favor to give him a rich mahogany color.

He leapt onto a high branch and roared with delight. One thing had not changed: his youthful exuberance. If anything, he appeared more playful and happy than Eden had ever seen him.

Because he doesn't know.

He had not yet discovered his god-like nature, she realized. Would that knowledge change him, or the fate of the world? Eden chose to believe in his goodness.

She announced herself with a friendly purr. As Kevon spotted her, his face lit with excitement and he ran towards her. She saw the panic in his eyes just before he knocked her down. He had not learned to control his amazing speed.

"Sorry," Kevon said, rolling onto the ground with her.

Like two kittens, they tussled with each other, testing and strengthening their bond. At once Eden confirmed that he equaled her strength in ways that Bramford did not. And yet her brother would never equal El Tigre's wisdom or stature.

Should she divulge his secret power? Not yet, Eden decided. Let Kevon enjoy his newfound freedom for a while before he had to bear the weight of the news.

Laughing, she slipped out from his hold and leapt to her feet. "Don't worry, you'll get used to being a cat, faster than you think."

He stretched out his long, rangy body on a sunny patch of earth. "I'll never forget what it was like before. They'll never push me around again."

"Don't be silly. There's no more *they*. We're free now."

He sat up suddenly, his luminescent cat-eyes piercing her with a forbidding look. "Don't you see? This changes everything."

Eden maintained a lighthearted approach. "Of course things are different now. You'll join our clan, and we'll start over, take back the land, just like my father dreamed we would."

"You don't get it, do you?"

She swallowed hard. Why did his every word ring an alarm in her head?

"Get what?" Eden asked.

"Hmmm." The Jaguar Boy paused. He seemed to be weighing something in his mind, and each passing second increased her anxiety.

"I like you, Eden," he said finally, with a blank stare that seemed at odds with his words. "You've been kind to me. If it weren't for you, I'd still be a disgusting mixed breed."

She emphasized the familiar endearment. "I told you, *Little Brother*, we're family and—"

"Bramford and I aren't family! He hates me, just like the rest of them. You can't deny it."

"He'll come to accept you, just give him time."

Please, Mother Earth, make it so.

"We've run out of time," Kevon said, darkly.

"Please," Eden began, wishing she had more to offer than lame phrases. "Just trust me. It'll be all right."

He jumped to his feet and began to walk in a circle around her. "You're so naïve, Sis. You think that friendship—" Reaching his starting point, he paused and cocked an eyebrow at her. "—or love, guarantees trust. Didn't you learn anything from your father? Evolutionary climbing—survival—is what counts."

"I disagree," Eden said into the empty space in front of her.

"Oh, no? What about Jamal?" Kevon was behind her now, and the dreaded name of her conniving ex, the FFP spy, hit her like a hard blow.

Eden wheeled around to face him. "That was different. I was desperate to find a mate."

"But you trusted your father, didn't you?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

Kevon gave her a smug look. "I assisted him, remember? How did the addition of Newman's Cure affect you?"

He would find out soon enough. Still, Eden held back, though her hesitation no longer stemmed from a desire to protect his innocence. She was afraid of Kevon, she realized with a start, or afraid for him; she couldn't say which.

"I'm stronger, that's all," she replied.

His voice cracked with excitement. "Stronger than Bramford?"

"Never forget, he's El Tigre!"

"Not for long, he won't be."

Eden felt a cold hand wrap around her heart. What had she done? This cat was both powerful and volatile—a bad combination. But no one, not even Kevon, threatened her beloved! Her body vibrated with pent-up energy as she stepped towards him.

"Explain yourself, Brother." Now the family term left a sour taste in her mouth.

Kevon's belligerent attitude disappeared, and the playful Jaguar Boy stood before her once more. Smiling, he slung his arm around her shoulders.

"You and me, we've both suffered. You want to get even, too, don't you, Eden? That's all I'm saying."

"I want to get married and live happily, that's all I want."

"Yeah, sure." Kevon cuffed her cheek, then leapt into the trees. "See you."

"Where are you going?" Eden demanded.

As he peered through a wreath of leaves, a ray of light grazed his face and gave him a devilish air. "I've got some business to take care of."

"What kind of business?"

He answered with a dark growl that trailed behind him like a long, gloomy shadow.

Eden stood rooted to the spot. The rapid drumming of a lineated woodpecker, *Dryocopus lineatus*, clocked the frantic thoughts that raced through her mind. For Earth's sake, had she been naïve to trust Kevon? No, she reminded herself that he had risked his life to protect her. Besides, how much trouble could one Jaguar Boy cause?

Still, she couldn't deny that he had changed, or perhaps the adaptation had revealed something dangerous inside of him.

Eden considered following him—spying on her brother. How low could she stoop? She was no longer a Pearl, but a powerful hybrid human with godlike powers.

Giving vent to her frustration, she arched her back, reached into the bottom of her being, and let loose a growl

worthy of her new status. An immediate hush descended around her. Eden smiled, very pleased at the effect she had created.

Her chest expanded, her arms flew wide. "That's right," she cried. "I'm the new goddess in town!"

Bramford would simply have to accept her for who she was, and her brother too.

The ribbons of light that had draped through the thick foliage now hung like mere threads. Along the byways of tree limbs, the traffic of birds and animals increased as they rushed to finish the day. It was time to get married.

Be happy, Eden.

Reaching the top of a hill, she looked down on the busy square. Women bustled about piling food and flowers onto a large brightly colored mat that was spread over the ancient pavers. Several men carried a large throne down the pyramid steps.

To one side of the square a group of young girls, who wore costumes with short petal skirts, stretched and swayed like flowers blowing in the wind. Eden thought wistfully of the small brown Chocolate Cosmos, the rare flower that reminded her of Yolo.

She fingered the handmade doll in her waistband as she pushed back a twinge of regret. More than anyone, Yolo would want her to be happy now.

And as Eden looked out over the wedding preparations, she realized that all her dreams would come true. *At last, Bramford and I will belong together.*

Excitement quivered in her belly as she imagined her wed-

ding night. In her mind's eye she peered into the future, like a voyeur stealing a glance at the intimacy she and Bramford would share.

He would hold her close as he slowly peeled away her pelt. The light in his eyes would burn straight into her heart. His warm, tender touch would brand her skin in private ways that only they would share.

Bramford would be gentle at first; at least Eden hoped he would. Her nerves would flitter like hummingbirds, dancing around the inevitable moment, even while, deep inside, she begged him to claim her. Finally, nothing would stand in the way.

No longer able to contain himself, Bramford would pounce. Eden would cry out his name, and thank Mother Earth that the mystery of love had been revealed.

Mates, forever.

Eden reeled forward, drunk with desire. When she stepped into the square, the villagers stopped their activities and stared at her. A murmur rose up from the crowd.

"Xochipilli Ocelotl."

Yes, she was their Jaguar Goddess. She smiled benevolently, ready to assume her place in the order of things.

As Eden scanned the area, she realized that Bramford had not yet arrived. She recalled old Holo-Images of the nervous, pacing bridegroom, and sensed his thoughts turned towards her as surely as hers were with him.

Meztli drew away from the group of women and approached Eden with a warm smile. She led her to the festive mat and pointed to a spot designated for the bride. Eden sat

down beside a generous bouquet of purple jacaranda flowers, *Jacaranda mimosifolia*. The aroma of deer meat, cooking over a nearby fire and still dripping with blood, stirred her pulse.

The celebratory preparations offered a sharp contrast to the sterile mating rituals back in the tunnels, which were nothing more than a series of medical tests after which two people, often strangers, were left in a room to perform the carnal act that would guarantee the survival of the species. The Aztec way was more fun.

Murmuring encouraging sounds, Meztli knelt beside her to arrange Eden's blouse. She positioned the ends so that they hung loose, then retreated to join María and Lucy. The children stood beside them, their eager faces beaming with pride.

Only then did Eden notice that they were under guard. She shot a steely look at the warriors that made them blanch. As soon as she was married, she would demand her friends' freedom.

Several drummers took their positions in a line at the bottom of the temple steps. Their lively tattoo sent a merry message: *Let the wedding festivities begin!*

But Eden's skin crawled as Huitzilopochtli and the astrologer appeared on high against a darkening sky. Torchbearers lined up on either side of them, the flares melting into the vermilion sunset. After a formal drum roll the group began a stately descent.

Not even those murderers could dim Eden's joy when the bridegroom entered the square with a swirl of incense behind him. She stared along with the crowd in wonder. Her urgent

need to tell him about her godly status; her fear of rejection, and her worries about Kevon all vanished under the hot look Bramford sent her way.

A ray of peach light broke free underneath the edge of night. It shot from the west across the village square and hit its mark: Bramford glowed in the sun's farewell embrace.

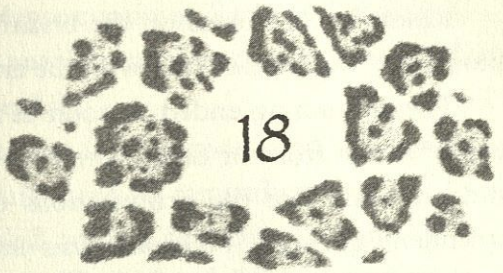
Like all Aztec grooms, his face was streaked with the same golden coating the sun god wore, though unlike that pretender, he didn't appear arrogant or unreachable. In fact, Bramford looked even more irresistible, if that were possible.

A regal headdress of black and white feathers from their cousin, the harpy eagle, added to his stature. It framed his glowing eyes, which held her in a trance. Around his neck hung a leather cord, from which dangled a long, sharp tooth.

Eden sensed rather than saw, in the way she often had recognized her father's or mother's presence before laying eyes on them, that the cord was of snakeskin, the tooth that of a jaguar—more gifts from the animal relatives she and Bramford now shared.

The intricately embroidered blue cape around his shoulders matched her blouse. Not that they needed such color coordination to mark their connection. Anyone could see the magnetic energy that flowed like a river of sparks from him to her and back again.

Eden might be a Jaguar Goddess but, at that moment, she was simply a besotted bride at her wedding.



18

EINSTEIN WAS RIGHT, Eden thought as she watched Bramford walk towards her in the last flush of sunset. Time was relative, the moment passing much too fast. She wanted to freeze it in her mind and never forget this deep, pure joy.

Just then her father hurried in front of Bramford, all but ruining the moment. The incense he carried now clouded Eden's view of Bramford. Her father's hands shook, and he walked unnaturally, like a drunkard whose forced uprightness makes his condition even more noticeable.

Poor Father. He was falling down that slippery slope called addiction.

A young Aztec boy laden with gifts moved up the line to walk alongside of him. He looked straight ahead, his face a mask of pride, if somewhat puzzled by the sudden change.

Several feet away from where Eden sat, her father tripped, and as the incensory tumbled from his hands, the crowd cried out in terror. She swooped to catch it before it hit the ground, which brought a communal sigh of relief.

Eden handed the incensory back to her father with a warning look. "Pay attention," she said

"Sorry, Daught," he mumbled.

Resuming her place on the bridal mat, she arranged her blouse the way Meztli had with the ends hanging loose.

The drumming ended as soon as Bramford and his cortege stood in front of Eden, who rose to meet them. Into the sudden hush rose the protestations of a parliament of resplendent quetzals, *Pharomachrus mocinno*. The multicolored birds shot out from the jungle, frantically flapping their wings. The avian outcry spread an uneasy feeling over the people, who considered the quetzal a sacred bird.

Something had startled the birds. It could have been anything, but Eden's instincts warned of danger. Let's get this wedding over with, she thought.

Night fell swiftly now, the pearlescent light of a full moon shimmering like a veil of white lace over the crowd. Huitzilopochtli sat upon an elaborate throne at the center of the square with the astrologer by his side. Torch flames cast cones of light upon their eager faces.

As unpleasant as ever, Huitzilopochtli issued a short command. Nothing happened until the astrologer came forward to repeat the phrase to Eden's father.

"What? What?" He started. "Ah, yes." He quickly placed the incense burner on the mat near Eden.

As the intoxicating smoke floated around her, she guessed it was supposed to calm the bride. And Eden was nervous, why deny it? She breathed in the heady aroma, immediately aware of its hypnotic effect.

Once again the wedding ceremony ground to a standstill. The torch flames snapped in the still night. Again the astrologer spoke harshly to her father, who stared off into space, glassy-eyed.

"For Earth's sake, please continue, Father," Eden said.

His brow creased in puzzlement as he turned and searched her face. "Yes, of course, Lily."

Her heart sank. He was farther gone than she realized. "It's me, Eden. I'm getting married, remember?"

"Indeed," he rumbled on at a fast clip. "From the moment I first saw Lily on the World Band, I felt something special for her, something inexplicable. Even Einstein said that gravitation cannot be held responsible for people falling in love. I could scarcely believe it when she responded to me. What could I ever offer someone as beautiful as she?

"I do not exaggerate when I compare the bluish-purplish color of her eyes to the bluebell flower, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*. According to common folklore—which has no scientific basis although more and more I find it conveys some inner truth—the bluebell symbolizes humility, gratitude, and everlasting love—qualities Lily possessed in abundance."

Eden glanced over at Huitzilopochtli, who conferred with the astrologer. Perhaps they accepted her father's speech as part of his matrimonial tradition, for they allowed him to continue.

"I thought if I did something great she would never regret her decision to accept me, you see?" he said, as his words began to slur. "But she died before I achieved my goal. I promised her I would finish what I had begun. She understood my long absences, and begged me not to take time off on her account. She was part of history, she said. Together we would set things right and save the Pearls.

"That's not right." He began to slow down, like a wind-up toy at its end. "No, she never uttered the words Pearl

or Coal—no racial labeling or fear-mongering for sweet Lily. Right up till the very end, she believed in man's basic goodness. Before she died she told me that I must carry on, no matter what, for her sake, you see?"

Eden's back stiffened. Had his drug-addled brain released a torrent of truth or fantasies?

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" she asked.

"Eden," he said, with sudden recognition. "It's up to you to carry on. For your mother's sake and mine as well."

Huitzilopochtli's booming voice announced an end to his patience. Eden looked helplessly at Bramford, who strode up to her father. A nervous murmur ran through the crowd, and she guessed the bridegroom had broken protocol. But then, who would dare stop the Jaguar Man?

"Doctor," he said in a firm but gentle voice, "allow me."

Her father shuffled to the side without another word. Eden stared after him with a heavy heart. Somehow she must help him.

But she was too happy to think about it now.

"Eden," Bramford said, in a husky voice. Up close, deep emotion showed underneath his golden mask. "Shall we continue?"

She gave him a small, grateful smile. "Please."

The young gift-bearer took his turn and stepped up beside them. He handed Bramford a necklace that matched the one he wore. As he slid the necklace around Eden's head, she reached to catch it, and the brush of their hands sent an electric current through her. The snakeskin cord and cat tooth were "something old," she realized happily.

Next Bramford placed a smaller but similar headdress to his own on her head. Eden fingered the harpy eagle feathers as images of brides veiled in virginal white popped into her head. It would count for "something new"—the last piece of good luck she needed.

Now the bride and groom mirrored each other. *Except for one thing.*

Before Eden could change her mind, she blurted out, "I have something to tell you, Ronson."

His eyebrows arched. "Can't it wait?"

"No, it's important." She caught his arm, and once more the people made their increasing discomfort known with small cries. The wedding party had strayed once too often from the script, but Eden rushed on. "Father changed the formula for my adaptation. I told him not to, but he did it anyway. I'm sorry."

Concern flooded Bramford's face. "Are you ill?"

"No, well, that's just it. It seems I'm immune to illness or even bodily harm, though there may be a limit. I just thought you should know I'm different from you."

Bramford stared at her blankly. Oh, Sweet Earth, if he rejected her now, she would simply die.

"I'm glad you told me," he said at last. He smiled as his gaze drifted down her body. "You know I like our differences. Let's finish this so we can explore them."

Eden felt the heat rise to her face. "Okay."

They sat side by side on the wedding mat, facing the crowd. A rumble of drums cued the group of young flower girls, who waited on the sidelines. They took up their posi-

tions between the bridal party and Huitzilopochtli. As the girls stretched and posed, Eden realized with delight that a celebration dance was about to begin.

Anticipation tingled in the air. Another musical cue sounded, and the performers dropped in unison to the ground. Slowly, they began to push upwards, fanning their hands around their faces. How lovely, like flowers reaching for the sun, Eden thought.

She gave Bramford a happy look, but he stared ahead, his expression grim. Perhaps he was bored.

The flower girls swayed on bended knees, while one girl at each end of the line broke away. Older and bigger than the others, these two wore costumes that resembled jaguar warriors. To look like men, Eden realized as they flexed their arm muscles.

After much posturing and yelling, the two players charged at each other and fought in mock hand-to-hand combat. Eden gasped as they fell, crushing several flower girls, who cried beneath them. The angry pair fought again and again until all of the flowers girls lay trampled on the ground. Finally the fighters appeared too weary to continue.

In their places, two more fighters appeared. These wore metal masks, one painted dark as night, and the other white as snow. *The Coals versus the Pearls?* The opponents glared at one another, but held their stances.

A terrible feeling stirred in Eden's gut. Again she tried to measure Bramford's reaction, but he remained stone-faced.

From the shadows a young girl appeared in the guise of the Jaguar Man with a painted cat mask and blue wedding cape. She also wore a snakeskin cord around her neck, and in her hair, harpy eagle feathers. Her growl impressed Eden.

But would the Jaguar Girl also be represented in these theatrics?

Just then, Eden's likeness, dressed in similar wedding finery, loped towards her pretend mate. As the pair embraced, the Coal and Pearl fighters trembled and the flower girls perked up their heads.

Eden began to relax. There was nothing to worry about.

But when the couple parted, a cold hand gripped her heart. The pretend Jaguar Girl was now swollen with child. From under her skirt she produced a cornhusk doll.

"Bramford?" Eden began in an anxious voice.

He squeezed her hand. *Trust me.*

Then the girl handed the doll—Eden's and Bramford's baby—to the sun god!

"No!" Eden jumped to her feet in a panic.

Bramford was quick beside her, his hands pressed on her shoulders. "Don't," he warned her.

Huitzilopochtli gave an exultant cry as he held the doll up in the air. The people echoed his joy. The flower girls rose with their arms to the heavens. The Coal and the Pearl fighters threw off their masks and joined in the celebration.

Eden felt the sticky web of conspiracy close around her. The chocolate fertility drinks, rich fattening food, relaxing baths, an auspicious wedding date, and providential adaptation—all of it was for the sake of her future offspring.

Did the Aztecs expect this child, the product of a union

between the avatars of love and war, to bring balance to the world?

Eden's mind slowed to focus on one thought: Bramford must have known all along. Had he agreed to trade their child for world peace—without asking her? He had hinted that they would each have to sacrifice something. But give up her future child to these murderers—never!

Before Eden recovered from the shock, the astrologer stepped in front of her and Bramford. She watched in confusion as his weathered hands tied the edge of Bramford's cape to the end of her blouse. Her father's words came back to haunt her.

—*Two lives are joined as one, the knot tied between them.*

But she had not agreed to play this part—a breeder for these devils!

The gift-bearer handed the astrologer a piece of maize cake, which he, in turn, offered to Eden.

"No," she said, jerking her head away.

Was she really a Jaguar Girl getting married in a fourteenth century village? Everything—marriage, a baby, even her inhuman adaptation—seemed like a dream. She was losing her mind.

"Please," Bramford said. "Take a bite, and it will be done."

A terrifying coldness seeped into Eden. Her heart felt like a stone in a cool, dark cave. With a low growl she started to pull away, but love held her there. She looked at the beastly man she loved, desperate to understand.

"Why?" Eden asked.

"Because it's the only way," Bramford replied.

"Is that all you have to say to me?"

"I was forbidden to tell you more. If I had, you might have refused to marry me. Am I right?"

"Maybe...yes."

"And that would have been the end of everything. For all our sakes, for Logan, your father, and the Pearls..." He took a deep breath.

In his hesitation Eden glimpsed the invisible burden Bramford carried. Still, he should have shared his worries with her.

He seemed to read her mind. "I revealed as much as I could. I hoped you would simply trust me. How can I explain?"

"I told you, Ronson, I would never abandon our child."

"And that's true. You will raise him to the age of reason—"

"Him?"

"Yes, Eden, we will have a son, who shall bring peace. A new day will dawn, and the whole world will be free to adapt."

"Won't our son have a say in the matter?"

"We always have a choice in life. But this shall be his calling. Our son would have to fight very hard to resist destiny. I expect it would kill him."

The finality of Bramford's statement struck her. "And what's our destiny?"

He looked deep inside her, and spoke to the Real Eden. "To love each other. Is that so bad?"

It was true. They belonged to each other, no matter what. And they would face the future together.

But one thing had to change.

"Look, either we're partners or we're not," Eden said. "You can't protect me from the truth anymore. I'm not the same frightened Pearl you once knew."

He nodded. "Fine. Full partners from now on."

She cocked her head towards Huitzilopochtli and the astrologer. "And they don't get to decide our child's future. If it's like you say, then he will decide for himself."

"Fair enough." Bramford gave her a curious smile.

"What?"

"You're much stronger than I thought."

Eden shifted her weight to one leg and fixed him with a sultry look. "Is that a problem?"

"Not at all." Bramford purred low and sweet. His musky smell set off a flare in her head. "Does it bother you?"

"I like it," she admitted to her surprise.

Laughing, he drew her into his arms. The astrologer thrust the cake at Eden with a threatening word, and she finally accepted it. Locked in her groom's embrace, they passed it back and forth, each bite a prelude to a kiss.

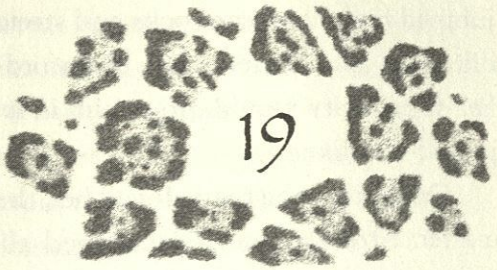
Bramford licked the last crumbs from her lips, and whispered, "You're mine now, Eden Newman."

A roll of drums announced the end of the ceremony. He picked her up in his arms and started across the square. The crowd parted before them with a joyous chant.

"Xochipilli Ocelotl!"

"Where are we going?" Eden asked her husband.

"To my lair," he said.



19

AT LAST: Mr. and Mrs. Ronson Bramford, Eden thought as they ran through the moonlit jungle. She didn't miss riding on his shoulders as much as she had feared. Well, maybe a little. But she wouldn't trade this glorious feeling of being grownup—and really sexy.

Eden kept pace with Bramford. Truth be told, she held her speed in check. He had no idea how strong she was. The truth would come out soon enough. Maybe even when they lay together in his lair.

The thought sent her heart soaring, and without thinking Eden flew past him. Seconds later Bramford's confused growl reached her. If she turned back, she risked a full confession or, worse, embarrassing him with his slowness. Not on their honeymoon, she needed time. Hadn't he said he wanted to explore their differences?

In the dank air Eden tracked his scent, heading into his territory, where she came upon an outcrop of stones that bordered a large cave. So this was the Jaguar Man's lair, his erstwhile bachelor's pad. The dark interior of the cave promised to reveal his secrets.

What would Eden discover there about him?

She itched to enter, but thought it best to wait. She

jumped high upon the rocks and stretched out, pondering her dilemma. No matter what Bramford said, Eden feared that her superiority would affect him in ways neither of them expected—or liked.

Of course if he really loved her, their differences shouldn't matter. After all, couples changed all the time. Look at her parents. Even while her mother had been alive, her father had grown more eccentric and distracted by his work. And, sadly, her mother had spent the last eight months of her life sick with The Heat. Apparently, if Eden believed her father's recent tale, her parents had shared a real partnership based on common goals, which suffered little from their changes and difficulties. She could only hope for the same in her marriage.

Perhaps Bramford would see that Eden's new powers were an asset to both of them. He was confident enough to handle it, wasn't he? And yet when he appeared at the edge of his domain, looking winded and puzzled, she wasn't so sure.

As their eyes met, Eden followed her instinct, and with a lusty growl, she leapt through the air to embrace him. They rolled to the ground, generating heat and desire. Bramford pushed on top of her—or rather, she let him. Cuffing her hands over her head, he held her captive beneath him.

"Why did you run off?" he demanded in a raspy voice.

Eden's heart tripped over itself like a dazed kitten. *Some goddess.* Tongue-tied, she stared up at him.

"Are you scared?" Bramford asked.

She nodded. Terrified, actually.

His face softened. "That's normal."

Eden laughed, short and hard.

"What's so funny?" he said.

"There's nothing normal about us, is there?" she replied.

A devilish look came into his eyes. "One thing is very normal and always will be—you're mine."

Scooping Eden into his arms, Bramford carried her into his shelter like a bridegroom taking his bride over the threshold. This was her new home, even if it was a cave.

He set her beside him, kneeling face-to-face on the soft, leaf-covered ground. "I want you, Eden," he said. It was both a powerful statement and a question.

Time slowed in her mind as she stood outside herself for a moment. Looking into his molten eyes, she knew there was no turning back. And finally, Eden was ready to jump across the mysterious divide between girl and woman.

"Yes," she said. "I want you too."

With great tenderness his lifted off her bridal blouse. Eden sucked in her breath. Then, as if claiming her, Bramford placed his hand on her chest.

"We'll take our time," he said.

Eden untied his groom's cape, and it slipped to the ground in a whisper crush. She ran her hands down his warm, bare chest. He was hers to claim.

Smiling, Bramford unwrapped the pelt that bound her breasts and drew her to him. The electric sensation of skin on skin left Eden breathless. There was nothing to stop them now from enjoying one another.

And yet, as shyness seized her, Eden buried her face in Bramford's chest. With a soft purr he titled her chin up and explored her lips, tasting their edges, licking them with his tongue. Each kiss softened her body like a flame melting a candle.

Now Bramford spread the cape over the ground and laid Eden upon it with infinite care. He no longer asked permission, but removed the other pelt from her hips and set Yolo's doll aside. As the humid air caressed Eden's naked body, she shivered with anticipation.

Bramford paused—to untie his loincloth, she realized with a start. Her heart quickened at the shock of his warm, taut touch, as he took her in his arms. They lay naked together, husband and wife.

Like a painter adding dabs of color to his work, Bramford continued to plant smoldering kisses across Eden's breasts and onto her stomach. She lay very still, though inside a riot of feelings ran amok. Her senses followed every inch he claimed, willing him to go on, amazed at the fiery trail he made, amazed that she could feel so alive.

"Relax, my love," Bramford whispered.

Eden moaned in reply, unable to form a cogent response. She thought he said, "I love you," but the blood drumming in her ears drowned out his voice.

She repeated it, anyway. "I love you."

As Bramford slid beside her with a deep groan, her breath caught in her chest. Eden felt his heart gallop under her palm, and drawing her arms around his neck, his pulse beat fast against her skin. Body heat dissolved invisible barriers between them, until they melted into each other.

Bramford pushed his weight into Eden, urging her to accept him. The last gasp of girlish fear flickered in her like the remains of the day. She wavered for a moment, knowing things would never again be the same.

Finally, Eden wanted nothing more than to belong to him.

She knew just what to do. That was the astonishing thing—the naturalness with which her body took over and banished her busy mind. She spoke to him in a sensuous language she was just beginning to learn.

Arching her back, Eden tightened her legs around his torso in a clear invitation. Bramford measured his advance, matching her cautious rhythm, as he began to posses her. She sensed the control with which he mastered his urge, like holding back a tidal wave that would break over her if he let it.

At the first twinge of pain, Eden stiffened. Hunched over her, Bramford laid his head on her shoulder and whispered, "Trust me."

She nodded quickly and, tilting her head to one side, exposed her neck. It was the signal that sent him over the edge. He clamped his jaws onto her neck, instinct driving his body now. She held on, her eyes wide but unseeing. Eden might be invincible, but at that moment she was his she-cat, and that was everything.

Her breath came in rapid bursts as Bramford drove her deeper. Unworldly groans bounced off the stones. A desperate frenzy clawed at both of them. No matter how often Eden had imagined this mating ritual, it took her by surprise, and thrilled her.

Just when she feared their passionate dance might destroy her, Bramford cried out and released his energy. He sank into her with heartbreaking tenderness. Wrapped in his arms, Eden purred softly and stroked his back.

Her bridal tresses had come undone, and with a dazed eye, she saw the small white flowers scattered on the ground, already fading like the past. Deep gratitude filled her for

every moment and seeming misstep that had brought her here.

Outside, the night soldiered on. The world seemed very far away. Nothing else mattered but being together. Beyond thoughts of divinity and bestial power, Eden was simply female, Bramford's wife. She shed her girlhood, as gladly as she had left behind her life as a timid Pearl.

Now she understood the deep satisfaction that Aunt Emily had expressed about being a wife. Though once more Eden wondered how the lifelong spinster had grasped things far beyond her experience.

I'm wife; I've finished that,
That other state;
I'm Czar, I'm woman now;
It's safer so.

How odd the girl's life looks
Behind this soft eclipse!
I think that earth seems so
To those in heaven now.

The explosive *kip! kip!* of a squirrel cuckoo from outside the cave woke Eden at dawn. The bold, edgy sounds of *Piaya cayana* seemed at odds with the perfection of the new day and Bramford's warm, naked embrace. But why did she feel uneasy, as if some danger hung over them?

Never mind, she simply had to get used to being happy.

Snuggling close to him, Eden said dreamily, "Good morning, husband."

Instead of an amorous greeting, Bramford clamped his hand over her mouth. He jerked his head towards the front of the cave as a long, dark shadow carved through the breach of gray light like a sword. A deafening silence rang in the air.

Something awful waited just beyond the cozy confines of the lair!

Eden fumbled for her strips of pelt, as Bramford crouched low, ready to spring. Then it came, the thing that she feared most: The past reared its ugly head.

A nameless, authoritative voice called out. "Bramford? Ronson Bramford, come out! We have the place surrounded."

By the darting motion of Bramford's head and his sharp sniffing sounds, Eden realized he was gathering information: where the enemy stood, how many they were, and what strength they possessed. It was a vital lesson in predatory skill, and she quickly followed his lead.

Eden began to sort out the familiar from the unfamiliar. Although inexperience and nerves hampered her progress, she realized there were several men outside. Perhaps they were the same ones whose tracks Lorenzo had discovered outside the compound, and caused them to leave.

Had the interlopers tracked them here? *Probably the FFP!*

Despite her terror, Eden sensed the troop's fatigue. After weeks lost in the jungle, they were probably weak and hungry; their demand a mere bluff.

"We can take them," she whispered.

Bramford held up a hand to quiet her—as if she were still some weak Pearl. Eden glared at him when she heard something that chilled her to the bone.

"Are you sure he's here?" the earlier speaker said.

And the little traitor answered. "He's here. I can smell him."

"Kevon," Bramford hissed.

Her adopted brother had brought strangers here! And after all Eden had done for him. She couldn't bear the fury in Bramford's eyes, or the second wave of recognition that hit him when he sniffed the air again and probably smelled a big cat. She cringed at the look of betrayal he aimed her way.

At least her husband didn't know that the Jaguar Boy was more powerful than he. Had Kevon discovered his superior advantage by now? Eden wondered.

The leader called out again, "We mean you no harm, Bramford. We come in peace. We only want to talk to you."

"About what?" Bramford shot back.

"Your stepbrother, Shen."

Bramford's jaw tightened, his back rippled with energy. He made an angry coughing sound, as if he had choked on his fury. Any second he would leap outside—possibly to meet his death.

There was only one thing for Eden to do. In the blink of an eye she leapt before he could stop her. His heartsick cry fell behind her.

"No, Eden!"

Teeth barred to kill, adrenaline pumping fast, she sailed through the air with a thunderous roar, aiming to kill the leader. With rapid speed she noted the enemy's positions—five soldiers arrayed in the shape of a pentagram—their startled reactions, the laser guns and camouflage uniforms and, with a tremendous shock, the color of their skin. Underneath

smears of dirt and peeling dark skin covering, Eden spied white faces.

They're Pearls!

Inches away from her target, she swerved and rolled to the ground. Rising to her feet, she stared in bewilderment at the group before her.

Kevon shrugged, his smile disarming. "Hey, Sis, sorry I missed the wedding."

His face dropped at the sound of Bramford's angry growl. Looking over her shoulder, Eden saw her enraged spouse bear down on her mighty brother like an avalanche.

"No!" she cried, jumping between them.

"Move!" Bramford yelled.

Eden really didn't want it to happen like this—not on her honeymoon, not in front of a bunch of strangers. Standing firm, she met his charge. He feinted to the right, but she moved faster than even she thought possible. Bramford blinked in confusion, then tried again to get past her.

What choice did she have? The poor beast was going to hurt himself. Eden tackled him, and this time she didn't hide her strength or let him gain the upper hand. She simply chose to ignore the murderous look Bramford gave her.

"It's all right," Eden said, quickly releasing him. "They're Pearls, see?"

Rising once more, she coyly flicked her hair over her shoulder, a girlish gesture that failed to disguise her power. Silly, really, but she hoped to reassure Bramford that she was still his adoring Jaguar Girl.

At the same time she felt a powerful, bursting sensation

inside of her, and once more thought of a root reaching down into the earth to suck up new energy. Recalling the same feeling after their scrappy fight at the river, Eden understood with a shock that this recent tussle had also given her a surge of strength.

And then it struck her: resistance made her even stronger, if that was possible. But then, wasn't that the basic principle of evolution? Only the strongest survived.

For Earth's sake, would Eden's power really increase over time with each struggle? If so, she would continue to surpass her mate.

Confusion colored Bramford's face. He seemed to have forgotten the others as he slowly rose to face her.

On edge, Eden repeated herself. "It's all right—Pearls."

But things were anything but all right.

He gave her a searching look. She could almost see him adding up recent clues—the first fight, her incredible speed, and the effortless way she had just subdued him. Still, he seemed puzzled.

Her quick glance at Kevon's equally bewildered expression confirmed he had not yet realized the extent of his supernatural powers. *But not for long.*

Hoping to diffuse the situation, Eden wheeled on the lead soldier, an older man with white hair and kind, pale eyes. Without warning, she snatched the Life-Band from his wrist. To his credit he merely winced, and she wondered if he had experienced this excruciating pain before.

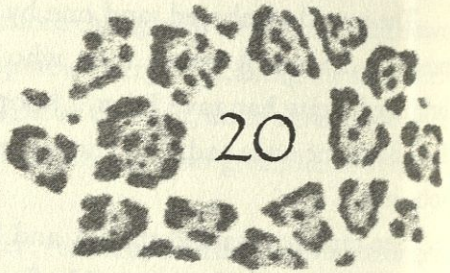
The others gasped with horror. Eden threatened them with a nasty growl. "Hand over your Life-Bands, or I'll rip them out!"

The intruders obeyed, and one by one she gathered their precious devices. A young man who wore a sensible wide-brimmed straw hat gave Eden a hoop earring similar to the Life-Band she once had. Even now the reminder made her ear lobe itch.

She rapidly disabled the lot and handed it to Bramford, trying to appear submissive. He flung them inside his cave with a grunt. Eden caught his eye with a shy smile.

Ignoring her, he turned to address the men. "What do you want?"

Only to love you, nothing more, Eden's heart answered. She had a sinking feeling it wasn't going to be that easy. Neither marriage nor her brutish body had brought the happiness she sought. At that moment she felt more distant from Bramford than ever.



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EDEN FELT potective towards the small group of Pearl soldiers who stood in front of Bramford's cave, despite their intrusion on her honeymoon. Their torn, dirty khaki uniforms and the depleted packs strapped across their chests told a tale of struggle and bare survival. She might have ended up like one of them.

The tall, pale leader raised his hand in a peaceful gesture. She guessed he was in his early forties, way past his prime. Like Kevon, he had a dimple in his chin, though it cleaved a deeper split, and on him, added to his air of authority. But his sallow skin color and bloodshot eyes made him look ill. How long would the Nordic-looking man last in this sun-splashed world?

The white dot on his forehead indicated he was mated or more likely at his age, widowed. Despite his advanced years, Eden had the feeling his broad shoulders could carry the weight of the world or, if necessary, suffer the first blow for his troops.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said in polite but weary voice. "I'm Johan Iverson, commander of the League of Maquis."

Holy Earth, the Maquis!

Eden's heart fluttered with excitement, though she hid it well. Throughout her life the Maquis had appeared and disappeared in the tunnels like a magic trick. You never knew when the militant Pearls would strike next. And here they were at her door, so to speak.

One of her first encounters with the Maquis had created ambivalent feelings in her. Eden must have been about six years old at the time, but she would never forget the excitement and dread of that incident. She and her mother had been waiting in the sweltering heat at a hovercraft stop when a young man took off his jacket and, in the process, loosened his Life-Band. A pendant on a chain had flashed in the air before he tucked it away again.

The man might as well have brandished a laser gun at the waiting crowd for deadly tension rippled across the platform. In her mind's eye Eden could still see the ornate "M" on the pendant, engraved in a Victorian script that harked back to a time when white men had ruled the earth. This was the sign of the Maquis, who now fought for the rights of the Pearls, the descendants of those same shortsighted rulers.

Fortunately, the incident had occurred in a run-down sector designated for the Pearls or else, the Coal majority would have killed the terrorist. Still, Eden had seen the fright in her mother's eyes. Every Pearl at the station had feared the rest of their kind might attack the few Coal riders. If that had happened, a bloody retaliation surely would have followed.

Eden's mother had warned her as soon as they reached their unit.

—Those people are not to be admired, Daughter. The

Maquis are no better than the FFP—like two sides of an old coin.

How had her mother known that she secretly admired the Pearl fighters? She was spooky that way. As usual, Eden had challenged her.

—Are we supposed to let them *destroy us, then?*

—Violence simply creates more violence. There's no escaping cosmic payback. Imagine a universe built of mirrors. Each time you commit a crime, it reflects back on you. And no good deed goes unrewarded. Everything is connected, Eden.

—But why did you deserve to be sick?

Her mother had already contracted The Heat, and the outing had tired her. She had sunk into a chair in the cramped common area. Her face, tinged red from the withering disease, had softened with a wistful smile before she replied.

—You were always such a smart girl. You must see that whether or not I act, I am guilty. Even with our silence, we participate in others' crimes. We are our brothers' keepers. Universal law affects us all.

—But I'm just one girl. What can I do?

—One day, it will be your turn to act. Many are called, but few are chosen. Be brave, and you will find a way.

Had her mother really expected her to sit back and take the Coals' cruelty? In the end, Eden had simply murmured her agreement—why tax Mother's meager energy—even while contemplating a serious option: If her eighteenth birthday approached with no potential mate in sight, she would join the Maquis. What did she have to lose if the Uni-Gov was going to kill her, anyway?

Then two-faced Jamal had pretended he wanted her, and

the rest was history, literally. Now Eden wondered whether Universal law affected a she-cat, or whether the goddess of love would suffer from cosmic payback.

She eyed Commander Iverson with a mixture of affection and suspicion, like having a distant relative arrive unexpectedly. Nice to see you, but how long were you staying?

The commander indicated a much younger soldier, about twenty years old, who stood nearest to him. "Lieutenant Adam Kirby, my second-in-command."

The morning sun shone down on Kirby's blond hair. He sported no dot across his smooth forehead. His deep gray eyes seemed to absorb all the light, drawing her in. Streaks of dirt followed the carved perfection of his face.

"Archangel" was the word Eden thought of. A cocky one, too.

He swept the beam of his cool gaze over her with an irritating familiarity. Was the lieutenant enjoying some private joke at her expense? Strangely, he showed no fear.

"Hello," Kirby said, drawing out the word so that it hung around her like an unwelcome embrace. "You're a Pearl—or you were, right?"

How could he possibly know? Eden was a dusky brown hybrid human, for Earth's sake—an immortal. If she had died and been reborn she couldn't have been more different from the girl she once was. What traits still branded her as a Pearl?

She caught the irritation that flashed in Bramford's face, though it was too subtle for anyone else to see. He had never thought of her as a Pearl.

Kevon broke the uncomfortable silence. "You'll help us defeat the FFP, won't you, Sis?"

Tension between the two Jaguar males flared again. A threatening growl rumbled out of Bramford's chest. "She'll have nothing to do with you," he said.

"Why don't you let her speak for herself?" Her brother's fear of Bramford had vanished.

Eden snapped at the impudent lieutenant. "I'm not one of you anymore."

"Maybe not," Kirby said with irritating smugness. "Or maybe, deep inside that amazing, wild body, you're still a Pearl."

Amazing? Taken aback by his flattery, she hesitated.

As Iverson suddenly leaned against a tree, coughing hard, everyone looked on with concern, even the Jaguar People. The human connection prevailed, despite their bestial forms.

"Do you mind?" Kirby pulled an old, dented silver flask engraved with the letter "M" from his backpack. Holding it up for her and Bramford to see, he jerked his head towards Iverson. "He won't admit it, but he's not well."

The old man bristled with indignation, even as an eager shine came into his eyes. Bramford grunted, which Kirby took as a yes.

"Go ahead, Commander," Kirby added, pushing the flask into his hands. "It's good medicine."

Iverson grabbed it from him. As he drank, the smell of alcohol and something else Eden could not name wafted towards her. *Some medicine.* Was the commander another high functioning but hopeless addict like her father?

As soon as the leader had caught his breath, Bramford accosted him. "State your business."

"Gladly, Sir." Iverson swept his hand towards the other three soldiers. "These are my trusted aides. The League of Maquis represents all Pearls, and we have come to ask for your help."

Bramford surveyed the meager troops, his gaze lingering on the slight man half-hidden under the brim of a straw hat. A layer of muddy camouflage could not hide his good looks. He held the Jaguar Man's gaze, his blue eyes never wavering.

Impressive, Eden thought. And yet, more than his comrades, this one reeked of fear.

Turning his attention back to Iverson, Bramford spoke with deadly calm. "You mentioned someone I might know."

"Yes, I have a letter from Shen that I hope will explain our case." He tapped on his pack. "May I?"

Although Bramford nodded, the commander slowly drew out a piece of rough paper. A look of embarrassed puzzlement came over him. "Er…shall I read it for you?"

Bramford snatched the letter from the commander's hand with a dismissive snarl. "You have no idea who you're dealing with you."

His face remained hard set as he gave the letter a brief glance. Then he passed it to Eden. "Read it aloud," he said.

She bristled at Bramford's demand until she realized that he would keep the men under surveillance while she read. That was how partners worked.

Eden recognized Shen's personal red chop, a "metallic dog" sign, from his security postings at Bramford's former lab. Due to the scarcity of paper, handwritten letters were reserved for top-secret communications, and usually written

over and over on top of previous texts, so that the old writing showed through. This one had been written on a clean sheet, which showed its importance.

As Eden began to read aloud, she tried to match her tone to the author's simple, direct style, so evocative of the kind, unassuming Amber-Coal she remembered.

Dear Brother,

Forgive me, for I have failed you and our father's memory.

By the time you read this, I fear the FFP will have locked you away, or you already may be dead. Even now, I would willingly trade places to save you. You must believe me.

But what can a man do when two of the two people he cares for most in this wretched world compete for his choice, and only the winner shall live? My mate, Violet, a faithful and true Pearl—how could I let her die at the hands of the FFP? My stepbrother, a man who might save thousands of people of all races—wasn't his life worth more than hers? These were the questions I faced.

Sadly, you may have already guessed my decision. I gave the FFP your coordinates in exchange for Violet's freedom. As a last resort, I took her and our daughter to the League of Maquis, who promised to protect them for a price. Then, when no news of your capture arrived, I gave the Maquis additional credits and the means to find you, along with this letter.

If by the grace of Mother Earth you have outwitted the FFP, I beg you to come back home. Times are harder than you can imagine. Ever since word of your adaptation leaked onto the World Band, the race wars have accelerated. The Coals have vowed to gain Dr. Newman's adaptation technology in order to rid the world of "inferior races." Gripped with fear, the Pearls are waging a rampage of unprecedented—and surprisingly effective attacks—primarily suicide missions.

I trust that you never intended to unleash such chaos. But there you have it: a blood bath on both sides.

As soon as I lay down this trusty old pen, I will turn a laser gun on myself. Living with the burden of my betrayal is not an option. Please, remember the good times we secretly shared at Father's knee when the world still held a shred of humanity.

Faithfully yours in death, if not in life,

Shen

Thick rain began to tumble through the forest, casting a somber gray over the morning that failed to cool the rising tension in the air. No one moved to take shelter; the tableau remained frozen in place. A young five-foot boa constrictor, perhaps mistaking the stillness for safety, slithered between the Maquis soldiers and the Jaguar People, etching a line in the damp ground.

Eden decided that her mother had been right: The cycle of violence would never end. At all costs, her new kind must never sink as low as her former species, the only one on the planet that destroyed itself on a large scale.

She carefully folded the letter in half, as if doing so would keep the sorrow inside, and handed it to Bramford. He crumbled it in his fist and tossed it into the cave, his expression as dark as the shadowy interior.

Fixing his steely gaze upon the Maquis commander, he said, "How do you intend to return to the tunnels? And what did Kevon promise you?"

The drink had flushed Iverson's slack cheeks with a ruddy color. He let out a sigh of relief that made Eden think he had been anticipating a mortal attack instead of an interrogation. "The stealth jet will return in four days to retrieve us—" he paused before adding significantly, "—and whoever else wishes to aid our cause."

"Where?"

"In the lowlands. We must leave in two days if we are to meet the transport in time. We had hoped for more time to discuss matters with you, but we got lost—we lost a good man who drowned in the river."

Iverson indicated two young men whose appearance startled Eden. They were Pink Pearls—redheads, like her mother had been, and therefore, highly susceptible to The Heat. Mostly, the weak gene had been bred out of the population. Even more shocking, these two were identical twins, an illegality under the one child rule. The brothers must have lived outside the long claw of the Uni-Gov since birth.

The commander's eyes clouded with pain as he continued. "Mac and Ian tired to save our fallen comrade. I'm afraid we all would have succumbed if Kevon had not appeared. Now time is of the essence."

Bramford's eyes cut over to the cave, where the intruders' Life-Bands lay. "Have you sent a signal from here?" he asked.

"On my word, we have not," Iverson replied. "In any case, we could not have changed the rendezvous time or place until we found you." He let his words hang in the air like a white banner of surrender.

At Bramford's baleful stare the old solider added, "Only one side can win this war. I hope you will decide in our favor."

"The only thing left to decide is whether you will live or die," Bramford said, cold as ice. "Either way, you're going to regret coming here."

"Surely you understand we had no choice but to—"

"We always have a choice. Just like my brother, who joined our sworn enemy: the League of Maquis." He spat out the name. "You're the last group on Blessed Earth I would help."

Iverson's shoulders slumped. "Yes, your father's death—collateral damage, I'm sorry to say."

"Who was the intended target?" Bramford asked.

"Unknown. A renegade unit committed the act and was killed in the process. We suspect they intended to eliminate someone close to your father, a business associate, perhaps."

"Was the intended target killed?" Bramford asked.

"Also unknown."

Bramford's civil veneer gave way to bitter sarcasm. "It seems you run a sloppy ship, Commander."

Iverson took Bramford's insult without the slightest change of expression. Clearly he had not risen in the ranks by being prone to rash outbursts.

But Eden reeled from their rapid-fire exchange. So the Maquis had killed Bramford's father!

"I take full responsibility," Iverson said. "The League must, by necessity, be a loose-knit group. However, we adhere to principles of cooperation and trust. Our motto comes from an old French legend: *Non sanz droict.*"

Bramford translated. "'We have the right.' As I recall, the greatest dramatist of all time, William Shakespeare, chose the same words for his family's coat of arms."

Surprise and respect flashed in the older man's face. It was unusual for a Coal to admire a white man, let alone be familiar with his work.

"In this case, I fear, we have lost all rights with you," Iverson said. "I beg you to hear our case."

"That's all very poetic, Commander. But give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you now."

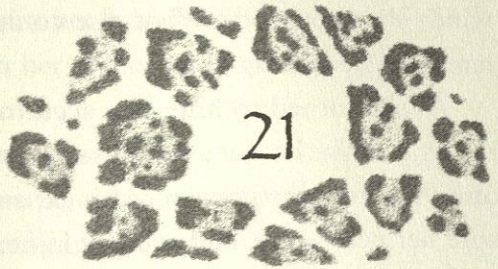
"I'll tell you why!" the slim, attractive soldier cried out.

All eyes turned to him, as he whipped off his straw hat, and long blond hair tumbled down his shoulders. The rain began to wash away the mask of mud, revealing not a man, but a young woman, who addressed Bramford with frightening familiarity.

"Because my dear Ronson, I have come a long way to see you and my son," she said.

Bramford did a double take, his eyes widening as if he had seen a ghost. And Eden thought he must have when he called to his dead mate.

"Rebecca, is that you?"



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A SHARP, INVOLUNTARY cry escaped Eden's lips, but the sound seemed to belong to someone else; everything around her felt alien. Rebecca was *not* dead—not killed by the FFP, as Bramford had claimed? She simply could not believe it.

As if to taunt Eden, a ray of sunshine broke through the trees and lit upon the girl's pretty face. There was no mistaking Rebecca now. The cornflower blue eyes, elfin face, and cupid bow mouth—Eden could have been looking at a picture of her former self.

When she had first discovered Rebecca's portrait in Bramford's jungle compound, Eden's father had joked that she could be Eden's clone. And Eden in her naiveté had dreamed that they were long-lost sisters. The fantasy had ended once she learned how Rebecca had betrayed Bramford and Logan.

Eden clearly recalled Bramford's story, which he had related while under the influence of the narcotic *bejuco de oro*. Apparently, when Rebecca had attempted to deal with the FFP, offering them information about her mate and son, they had double-crossed her. And when Bramford had refused to pay their demands, they had killed her, or so he believed.

Or had he, as a shaman, glimpsed a future scenario in

which Rebecca died? What else could Eden think—that her mate had lied to her?

As she turned to him, hot accusing words tangled in her throat, and she let out a distressed grunt. This was not the picture she wanted to present to his ex: an enraged, wild creature with her pelt askew and murder in her eyes.

Dumbfounded, Bramford stared at his former mate. Oh, Mother Earth, the truth shattered Eden's heart into a million little pieces. By law Rebecca was still his mate!

"You're alive," he said.

"And you, Ronson, are stunning," Rebecca said in a honey-soaked voice. "I never dreamed you could improve on your looks." A sly smiled twisted her lovely mouth. Her little surprise must have had the effect she desired. "I've missed you terribly," she added.

Then she turned her gaze on Eden. Sunlight bounced off the rocks, illuminating her sparkling blue eyes—or did they gleam with mockery?

"Who's this?" she demanded.

"Huh?" Bramford blinked hard, as if waking from a dream.

Wrinkling her nose in distaste, Rebecca wagged a finger at Eden. "That strange cat girl?"

"Eden Newman," he replied. "My mate."

"I don't think so." Rebecca whipped a bandana from her pants pocket and wiped her grimy forehead clean. A clear white dot showed. "You may have taken off the sign, but mine remains, as well as undeniable evidence—our son, Logan."

Hot white light flashed in Eden's mind. The thin, tenuous cord that tethered her to her basic human nature snapped,

sending her careening into her beastly self. A well-lit, imaginary tunnel appeared in her brain, and square in the middle sat her prey.

Kill her. Kill Rebecca, now!

But as Eden flew into the air, a heavy weight collided with her and brought her tumbling to the ground.

"No!" Bramford cried.

He seized the advantage, pinning her down, but not without a fight. She slapped him hard across the face, the sting of it on her hand. As he jerked back, Eden lunged for his neck and broke the skin. His blood flowed on her tongue.

As Bramford arched his back with a tremendous roar, Eden threw him aside and gained the upper hand. *So be it.* She would kill him too. Better dead than with that lying bitch!

But Bramford brought her to her senses with a simple command. "Stop, for Logan's sake."

Eden dropped her hold on him with a heavy groan. She looked away, riddled with shame.

"Tsk, tsk. Such a savage." Rebecca shook her head. "When can I see my son?"

Bramford wiped the blood from his neck as he rose to his feet. "We'll go now," he said, without a glance at either one of his mates.

"But—?" Eden shot to her feet, sputtering.

"What can I do?" Bramford hissed through a clenched jaw.

Nothing, she realized. The boy created a permanent bond between his parents, and there was absolutely nothing anyone could do about it, not even a goddess.

And what if Rebecca insisted on taking Logan back to the

tunnels? Bramford would never risk falling into the hands of the FFP, who would slice and dice his genes. But how could he give up his beloved son?

Eden glared at the detestable blonde with a look so hard even a big cat would have flinched. Rebecca only smiled that taunting smile. She might hold the trump card of Bramford's child, but Eden would bide her time until Rebecca revealed her true, devious nature, as she inevitably would.

After all, how long could this mistress of illusion maintain her coquettish pose here in the wilderness? And when her false veil fell away, even Logan would wish her gone. Aunt Emily had understood exactly how appearances could deceive.

A charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld,—
The lady dare not lift her veil
For fear it be dispelled.

But peers beyond her mesh,
And wishes, and denies,—
Lest interview annul a want
That image satisfies.

Eden left her beguiled spouse and the others in her dust as she ran ahead towards the village. She needed a few minutes alone with Logan to reassure him of her continued support. Approaching the square, she heard the warning rumble of drums, a news flash of sorts: *Trouble is here!*

Bursting through the trees, Eden found the villagers gathered once more in the square. As the crowd turned to stare at her with anxious eyes, the buzz of conversation died.

Even without the aid of the ever-present Happy Eye that spied on everyone in the tunnels or the high-speed communication of the World Band that constantly droned news into peoples' heads, word spread just as quickly in the jungle. Because, she realized with a start, the Aztecs had her and Bramford under surveillance, no matter how primitive.

The jaguar warriors formed a line at the base of the pyramid. Seated on his throne, Huitzilopochtli showed a strain in his usual determined countenance, while the astrologer fidgeted beside him. The sole friendly reception Eden received came from María and her two girls, Carmen and Etelvina, who smiled bravely.

Poor Logan seemed paralyzed with fear. His chalky white face and timid pinkish eyes appeared to sink under his black hood. The growing confidence, the eager smile—all the gains of the last few weeks in which Eden and the others had been free to interact with him—disappeared.

"Don't worry, Logan," Eden said, placing a protective arm around him. "No one will hurt you. Not if I can help it."

Not even your lying mother.

He clutched at her hand. Did the boy know how completely his world was about to change? Or that he stood in the middle of cosmic forces that gathered like battalions on opposite sides? What a huge burden to place on such small shoulders, one Eden vowed to buffer as best she could.

"Father!" Logan cried as Bramford entered the square.

The boy's cloth-bound feet slapped across the ancient stones as he ran. Sweeping him into his arms, Bramford slant-

ed such a look of misery at Eden that she began to run to him too—this was her family!

Then Rebecca strode into view, and the sunny square seemed to darken, the vivid colors drained to a lifeless gray. Eden should have killed the evil witch when she had the chance.

The rest of the Maquis soldiers followed behind Rebecca. But where were Iverson and Kevon?

Eden's father came running down the pyramid steps to join the crowd. He arrived fresh and ready, clearly high as a kite.

The people watched intently as Rebecca approached Bramford and Logan. She played her part well, with convincing touches of maternal tenderness and wifely supplication.

"Hello, Logan." Her moist eyes pleaded; her voice trembled. "It's me, Mother."

He looked from her to his father. But Bramford masked his emotions, just like old times. At least he wasn't going to make it easy on his faithless mate.

As Logan hesitated, Rebecca forced a smile. "I've longed to see you, Son," she said, her voice rising higher and higher. "You can't imagine how often I've thought of you."

Finally Logan shook his head and, with frightened eyes, begged Eden for help. He threw his weight towards her, his thin arms outstretched. Bramford let the boy pull him in her direction.

But Rebecca draped herself around Logan—and his father—with a loud sob. Through her tears the little actress cried, "Please, forgive me! I couldn't come until now."

Although Bramford stiffened at her embrace, he did not

move away. He simply held on to the boy for dear life. Eden suddenly grasped how much the great Jaguar Man feared this woman, who had the power to snatch away his son.

If only Eden could help. But what could she do?

Already, Logan softened towards his mother; his gaze grew hopeful. Like a sapling blown in the wind, he now leaned towards her. Eden supposed that on a deep cellular level he recognized—and welcomed—the maternal connection, despite his early abandonment. Standing across from the reunited family, she felt as if the Earth had cracked open and left her stranded on the other side of a wide chasm.

Rebecca gathered herself and added a new tactic—bribery. She drew a bunch of used colored pencils from her pack and offered them to Logan. "This is for you. I remember how much you like to draw."

At the same time that Logan reached for the gift, Bramford set him down. The package fell to the ground, and mother and son both bent to retrieve it. Standing tall over them, Bramford locked his gaze onto Eden with a clear message.

I'm sorry. I love you.

The world around her fell away, taking all her troubles with it. No matter what misunderstandings lay between them—and there were quite a few—nothing would ever separate them, not even this.

The harsh realities they faced came crashing back into focus as Huitzilopochtli spoke. Grim-faced, he beckoned Bramford and Rebecca to his side. The Maquis soldiers squared off across from the Jaguar warriors, forming a corridor on either side of the sun god. *Laser guns, or poison darts?*

Eden suspected that none would survive, and the cycle

of violence would spin around and around like an old, worn carousel.

Standing by Huitzilopochtli's chair, her father translated. "You come, too, Eden."

Panic raced through her veins, and she shot Bramford a questioning look. With a simple look he conveyed his usual message: *Trust me.*

But where that had gotten them?

While Eden hesitated, the villagers began to rumble. A layer of disquiet rippled over the square as hot and deadly as the blistering sunrays that fell like electric prison bars around the Pearls.

Eden considered how the Jaguar Couple might escape, even take Logan with them. But the boy would not last long in the jungle unless he adapted. Until then, the three of them were trapped.

As Huitzilopochtli yelled at her father, Eden heard her divine name—but with a question mark. *"Xochipilli Ocelotl?"*

Now the sun god repeated the title while pointing at Rebecca! As if that treacherous female could ever represent love.

Blinking fast, Eden's father repeated his request. "Daught, please come."

She threw back her shoulders and marched towards them with all the dignity she could muster. Just as she arrived to stand between the two armies, Kevon loped into the square. In his arms he carried the Maquis leader, who looked deathly ill. At once, he placed the old man on the ground and cried out, "Eden!"

Kevon thought she was in danger, Eden realized. Before

she could stop him, he leapt to save her with a vicious growl. A poison dart whistled through the air and landed in his jugular vein. He stumbled to the ground and fell dead.

Eden started towards him when Bramford moved to block her. "Don't move, I beg you."

She obeyed, trapped between two different kinds of love. Once again, her brother had proven his loyalty and risked his life for her. She must believe he had had good reason to lead the Maquis here.

Vexed by this new complication, Huitzilopochtli uttered a string of brisk commands. The Aztec soldiers struggled to pick up Kevon's heavy, inert body.

Eden sidled up to her father and whispered, "But how can he be dead?"

"Hmmm," he mused. "I conjecture that the speed of the dart allowed enough time for the poison to enter the subject's bloodstream, temporarily disabling him."

"Temporarily?"

He nodded towards Kevon, who already raised his head in a daze. "As you can see—"

"He's not dead." Eden's breath rushed out of her.

His handlers gasped in horror as if Kevon had come back from the dead. Which maybe he had. They looked to Huitzilopochtli for direction. He waved them away, and only the warriors' greater fear of the sun god compelled them to continue carrying Kevon across the square.

"However," Eden's father said. "Note where the weakness lies. I suspected one might exist—nature must find a balance in all things."

"What are you saying?" Eden asked.

"I'm afraid your invulnerability is not constant, Daught. In layman's terms, you have a weak spot."

"Vulnerable, but not mortal?"

"Yes, well, if the poison is strong enough, and the speed of entry fast enough, then your extraordinary immune system might not rise to the defense before death takes hold." Her father laughed to himself. "I could not have constructed a better experiment than the one we have just witnessed."

Sometimes Eden wondered if he had a heart. "Ask where they're taking him," she said.

The sun god uttered a brusque reply to this question, and her father explained. "Kevon will remain in prison, until the matter is settled."

Eden's stomach clenched. "What matter?"

"It appears that Rebecca's arrival has confused the situation. If she is Bramford's mate—and naturally, the boy is primary evidence—then perhaps they have chosen the wrong girl to be the goddess of love, you see?"

"That can't be." *Could it?*

Eden recalled the prophetic images on Tezcatlipoca's temple walls: the blond, blue-eyed girl standing over the Jaguar Man, demanding his blood. She would never sacrifice Bramford. *But Rebecca would!*

And surely Bramford would fight her, and win, ensuring the continued dominance of war.

A dark, ominous shadow fell from the top of the pyramid, casting a sudden pall over the group below. Tezcatlipoca appeared there, unchained now, his arms raised in triumph. Eden watched with dread as the sun god and his astrologer

turned and trudged up the steps, their heated whispers trailing behind.

Had this confusion over the right to represent Xochipilli cost them the upper hand? Would they, could they, annul Eden's marriage to Bramford?

Turning to her mate for reassurance, she found him engaged in animated conversation with Rebecca and their son over a picture that Logan had just drawn. Eden felt sick as they exclaimed over its artistic merits and cleverness.

Leave, she commanded her feet, which stuck like clay on the stones. She wanted to be alone, away from double-dealing humans.

As she ran towards the jungle, Bramford called, "Eden!"

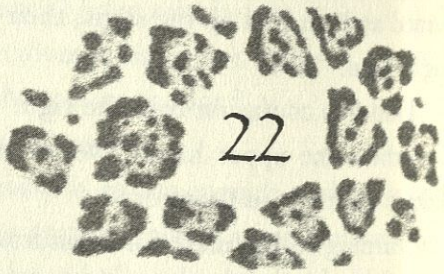
Hope shot through her until, turning around, she saw Rebecca grab his arm. "Oh, look!" his other mate said. "Did you notice the little bird in the tree?"

Bramford sent Eden a pained look, begging her to understand. She hurried on, hoping to hear the heavy fall of his footsteps behind her. Instead, Logan's laughter floated past like delicate bubbles.

How could Eden ever stand in the way of the boy's happiness?

At the edge of the square, she caught a glimpse of Rebecca gazing up at Bramford, her body tilted close. He held himself apart—but not far enough.

Eden darted into the brush, the ache in her chest rubbing her raw like broken glass. Her savage cry sent flocks of birds vaulting skyward. Then, dropping onto all fours, she escaped into the fetid jungle where she belonged.



22

EDEN ENTERED Bramford's lair with a long sigh. The scent of their passion still lingered in the air like a rebuke. She lay down on her groom's blue cape, where they had mated just last night. *Some honeymoon.*

A slash of late-afternoon sun glinted off the Maquis' Life Bands that littered the back of the cave. With a sudden rush of anger, Eden realized that the hoop earring belonged to Rebecca and flung it outside with a cry.

She wouldn't think about Bramford's family reunion, or the spell Rebecca probably cast on him this very minute. And yet she couldn't think of anything else. If only Eden could forget Bramford. Was that what Aunt Emily would have advised?

Heart, we will forget him!
You and I, to-night!
You may forget the warmth he gave,
I will forget the light.

When you have done, pray tell me,
That my thoughts may dim;

Haste! lest while you're lagging,
I may remember him!

Old habits encouraged Eden to deny her heart and retreat to her mind. She began to identify each sound in the robust jungle orchestra. There was the plaintive, weeping call of a cinnamon becard, *Pachyramphus cinnamomeus,* an ode to a broken heart. A white-nosed coati, *Nasua narica,* warned off competing males with repeated snorting sounds.

What good did it do? Even if Eden regurgitated an entire encyclopedia of flora and fauna, thoughts of Bramford would still loom large in her mind: the warm silky feeling of their entwined bodies, like sweet dripping honey; the hot explosions that had rippled through her when they mated.

She stared up at the roof of the cave, conjuring the image of his lucid yellow-green eyes. Framed by her memories, the Jaguar Man's reassuring gaze held her entranced. Try as she might, Eden could not hold on to her anger; in an imagined flutter, his long lashes brushed it away.

Maybe she could not deny Logan his real mother, or Rebecca's legal claim on Bramford. But then Eden no longer belonged to the world of civilized conventions. Under the law of the jungle, Bramford belonged to her!

A small but determined growl climbed from her belly into her throat. The lusty sound gurgled from her lips, and as it echoed against the stones Bramford's apparition seemed to smile, releasing her from the charm of illusion.

A pair of glasswinged butterflies, *Greta oto,* flitted onto the lip of the cave and hung there. As the male folded around the female, the transparent patches on their wings, as clear

as glass, gave the impression that they were one. By the next day they would be dead, the twenty-four hour sojourn of love at an end.

Wouldn't Eden risk a broken heart for just one more day with Bramford? Yes, her heart whispered. She must claim him, as well as her place as the goddess of love.

A rustle of coarse leather ferns, *Rumohra adiantiformis,* and Bramford's unmistakable tang stirred the air. Eden dreaded the slow, careful approach he made, as if he feared their encounter. His shadow fell across the entrance to the cave. What was he thinking as he hesitated there?

She couldn't wait another minute and stepped out to meet him. His tortured expression immediately melted her heart. He seemed burdened by the weight of the world, and maybe he was.

Eden conveyed volumes with a single, tender word, "Hi." *I love you, and we're going to be okay.*

He took her in for a moment, then returned equal faith and renewed intimacy with his smile.

"I swear I thought she was dead," Bramford said with a hitch in his voice.

"I believe you," Eden said. "Either the FFP lied or Rebecca did. What does it matter?"

"Come with me."

He took her hand and led her down the slope to the slow-moving river. Several times questions bubbled up in her, and each time she pushed them back down into the churning pit of her stomach. Accusations or manipulation, especially fear—what kind of wife would add these to her husband's heavy load? They were together, that was all that mattered.

Be happy, Eden.

She sat by him on the sandy shore in strained silence, the last rays of sunshine warming her body: Just two Jaguar People working out their relationship issues, really no different from any other couple.

Bramford looked to where triangular panes of light broke apart and reformed in the wake of a pod of Amazon river dolphins, *Inia geoffrensis.* The harsh sun had turned their flamingo-colored skin a dull gray-pink. The leader, a large male, swiveled its highly flexible neck, catching Eden's eye for just a second. She shrank back as she recalled the Indian legend that eye-contact with one of these enchanted *botos* could bring on lifelong nightmares. She had enough troubles.

Bramford finally began in measured tones. "When I first contacted your father several years ago, I asked him what he thought about the ethics of adaptation. His opinion came down heavily on the side of progress and evolutionary advancement, as you might imagine.

"I said, 'Doctor, have you considered what might happen if man's emotional capacity for empathy isn't increased in proportion to his power?'"

He made a fair imitation of her father's detached manner of speech. "'What? What? Great predators survive precisely because of their lack of emotion. We cannot afford such a luxury. Mother Nature will teach the new race to develop a conscience, just as she has done in the past.'"

Bramford glanced at Eden, gauging her reaction. She gave him an understanding smile. Who was she to judge?

"It was my fault," he said, returning his gaze to the water. "Time was running out. I feared the FFP would discover

Logan's location here. For his sake, I risked it all for the great experiment with mankind. And now I must pay the price."

"What do you mean?" Eden said with growing alarm.

"There was a chance, a small chance, that I could control the technology, and I grabbed it." He laughed bitterly. "How arrogant I was."

"No, it's Rebecca fault; she ruined everything. You were only trying to protect your child."

"You know that little niggling feeling in your gut that tells you when you're making a mistake? Well, I ignored it."

"But, Bramford, what choice did you have?"

"I told you, we always have a choice. Perhaps I could have required your father to balance the emotional and physical changes. It might have taken more time, but in the end—"

"You're wrong!" Eden exclaimed. "Even this conversation shows how empathetic you are. And we have strong feelings for each other, don't we?"

Bramford hung his head on his chest and replied. "Yes, we do."

"Then why blame yourself?"

He threw himself back on the riverbank and stared up at the dusky peach sky. His chest rose and fell like the swell of a deep wave.

The sudden exposure of his body, stretched beside Eden, took her breath away. With great effort she restrained the impulse to run her hands from his broad shoulders to his firm thighs. This wasn't the time for that.

Bramford continued in a weary voice. "If things had stayed the course, then we would have been safe—you and

Logan and I. Our child would have grown to be a great leader and brought peace to the world. He would have defeated prejudice with love—as only the offspring of love and war could do."

"Would have?" Eden didn't like the sound of it. A gaping maw opened up deep inside her as the meaning of his words came clear. She gave him a sharp look. "So that's why you insisted that no one else adapt? If we contained the technology, the war to end the world would be avoided."

"Yes," Bramford concurred. "If either side gains hold of the technology, both will be destroyed. The Pearls could never control it, and the Coals would create an army of hybrids that would wipe out everyone else."

She groaned with the realization of her foolhardy mistake. "And I tipped the balance when I let Kevon adapt. How did you put it? My decision 'cut' the future in to a different pattern. Iverson and Kirby and Rebecca—they probably would never have found us without Kevon's help, and the technology would have been contained."

The cruel irony crushed Eden, and Bramford's compassionate look only made her feel worse.

"That's right," he said.

"But what about the prophetic pictures on the temple wall?" she said, recalling the image of the blond, blue-eyed girl. "I would never kill you. And if Rebecca wasn't supposed to be here then..." Eden finally grasped the truth Bramford had faced all along.

"Sweet Mother Earth," she said in a horrified whisper. "You were going to sacrifice yourself."

"Try to understand, Eden. I didn't ask for to be the Jaguar Man; I was chosen. And if giving up my life guarantees my loved ones' freedom, I would gladly accept my fate."

"No! It can't be." And as much as it pained Eden to think of his other mate, she asked hopefully, "Now that Rebecca is here, has the plan changed—your death, I mean?"

Bramford rose onto his elbow, studying Eden's features, as if pressing them into his memory. A pale-vented pigeon, *Patagioenas cayennensis,* peeked out from the brush on the opposite shore and began its soft *kuk kuk croo.* Like its cousin the carrier pigeon, which in old times had been trained to carry messages over thousands of miles, this dull purple fellow seemed to await their instructions. *Kuk-kuk-croo, what's the news?*

"Remember," Bramford finally said. "The future is never set, but simply follows life's current direction, which can change in a moment with a single action. Rebecca wants something—I know that. And she will use whomever she can to help her get it, including our son. As long as you and I remain here, the world has a chance."

"Because of our son," Eden began, fighting back the horrible image of Bramford's life draining away. "But love must defeat war, meaning you—"

"Another way to interpret it is to see love bringing balance back to the world."

"Fine. But if love fails, the war to end the world occurs. Then no one wins—least of all you and me."

Bramford appeared unperturbed, with no indication that the discussion involved his possible demise and the destruction of Earth. Eden wanted to shake him, or kiss him—anything to avoid the dismal truth.

"In the worst case scenario," he said in a maddening conversational tone, "Rebecca takes the technology back to the Pearls, and the world ends."

Eden lurched over him, casting a shadow across his face. "The worse case is you'll die. Between losing you and a war in the tunnels, which outcome do you think I'd choose?"

A bittersweet smile creased his savage face. "I believe you would choose the greatest good, as I would."

"You're wrong!" Her heart thumped like that of a small rabbit caught in a net.

If not for Logan, she would drag Bramford away; but that would be like cutting out his heart to save him.

"Eden, could you really be happy knowing your own people were being slaughtered?"

The quiet thrill she had experienced when she first saw the Maquis in the jungle touched her again. No matter how different she was it still hurt to imagine every last Pearl wiped from the face of the earth.

Bitterness crept into her voice. "We never should have come here. It's these bloodthirsty Aztecs and their damn calendar."

"It wouldn't have mattered," Bramford said with resignation. "Sooner or later, the world would have come knocking at our door."

"We were trapped from the beginning. Either you die or—" Eden's voice broke with emotion, "—or all those people die. For Earth's sake, we never had a chance—"

He caught her in his arms. "Eden, my love."

"I'm sorry. For everything," she said, burying her head against his chest.

Bramford ran his hand down her back, pulling her tight against him. They rolled onto the sand and stared into each other's eyes. Eden molded herself to him, drawn by the desire in his burning gaze.

"What about our honeymoon?" he said.

"What about *her?*" she replied.

"You're mine, that's all that matters."

"It's true."

Somehow they would outwit the ominous forces that conspired against them, including Rebecca's wicked schemes. They simply must.

"If we're going to make a baby, we should keep at it," Bramford said.

"Okay," Eden murmured.

His eager purr set off a stampede of feelings in her. As he kissed her, heat kindled between them in a sudden flame. She felt herself falling deeper and deeper into something wonderful, something private they created when they lay together. How quickly the invisible barriers that separated two people disappeared when love wielded its tender punch.

And there, in that sweet place, Eden gave vent to her frustration and fears. She wanted to forget, if only for a moment, what fate held in store for them. Suddenly she bit Bramford's lip and drew blood. He responded with a raspy growl that sounded excited and curious.

She licked off the blood, teasing his tongue with a taste

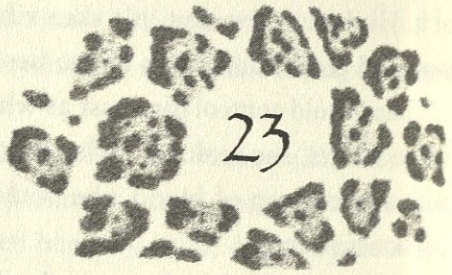
of it. His body grew taut, his skin vibrated. He gave a deep, wounded groan that shook her to her core.

Eden could control him, just as when she had ridden upon his shoulders, she realized with a burst of excitement. Now, with a mere drop of blood, she could send this beast into a passionate frenzy.

Bramford ravished her mouth, demanding more of her than she knew possible. Rolling her onto her back, he swept on top of her, as if they were bound by magnetism.

As he cupped her hips to his, Eden folded around him like the water rounding into the shore. She grabbed hold of his shoulders and arched her back into a parabola of pleasure. A blood-red sky twirled overhead, a private canopy just for them.

Happiness is now, Eden. That's all there is.



23

DON'T GO, Eden's heart pleaded. With deep trepidation she watched Bramford walk away from the riverbank. He cut a path through a glossy stream of moonlight, all sinuous, feline grace in motion.

She fought down the anxiety that shot up into her chest. With every step Bramford took, their uncertain fate loomed larger. He had decided to drink the *bejuco de oro* and, in his shaman's role, seek guidance. The Maquis would depart the next day to meet their transport, and by then, custody for Logan had to be settled.

Stopping at the edge of the forest, Bramford glanced over his shoulder. "Don't worry," he said. "The gods will show me a way. You and I are for forever."

Eden forced a smile. Here was her chance to prove how much she trusted him. And yet, she doubted whether El Tigre or his lofty gods understood the depths to which a desperate Pearl like Rebecca might sink.

"Stay here," Bramford added. "I'll return for you in the morning."

She nodded her agreement, even as a different plan hatched in her mind. While her husband lay in a trance, she would sneak back to the village and, using whatever means

the Jaguar Goddess had at her disposal, find out what his nasty ex was up to.

As soon as the jungle denizens' sharp cries faded in the wake of Bramford's departure, Eden sprang to her feet. Shunning the pearly gaze of the moon, she flew through the shadows, until she slipped into Heaven's Gate. There, she caught the scent of Kevon and her Huaorani friends, Lorenzo and Charlie, coming from the forbidding stone prison.

With shark-like stealth, Eden glided up the hill and spied a pair of eagle warriors on guard. She paused to listen to the story the night sounds told. The guards chatted around a small fire pit, unaware that a great predator watched them. The two brothers slept in their cell, while Kevon's restless footsteps drummed upon the stones of his enclosure.

How strange that the Jaguar Boy stayed in prison. Could it be that he still had not discovered the extent of his extraordinary powers? Eden wondered whether she should wait to free him until after the Maquis had left. She did not want to throw another unwanted curve to the future.

And yet, she owed Kevon for his loyalty, didn't she?

Eden sank down on her haunches, ready to attack the guards, when her mother's counsel rushed back to her.

—We are our brothers' keepers. Violence creates more violence. There's no escaping cosmic payback.

Just as quickly, Eden rejected the advice. These people had killed her best friend, threatened to steal Eden's rightful place as Bramford's mate, and imprisoned her family and friends. Her mother had been a Pearl, a class to which Eden no longer belonged. Predators like her viewed justice in basic terms of survival.

Kill or be killed.

Menacing, guttural sounds rumbled from her throat and shook the air. At once the erratic vibration of the soldiers' hearts reached her. Eden licked her lips, her appetite whetted. How lovely to live on the other side of fear, to have it call to her like sweet birdsong.

With a bloodthirsty growl she leapt at the nearest warrior, a teen no older than Kevon. He aimed his spear back and forth, blinded by the darkness. Eden came in low and caught his chest in her jaws. She didn't need a pretty ceremonial knife to rip out his heart—no wonder the Aztecs had chosen the jaguar as the totem of war.

Then a sharp blow hit her. Eden screamed more from habit than pain. Wheeling around, she advanced on the second guard, who had buried his spear in her back. She yanked it out and snapped it in two, as if it were a dry twig. Although her blood dripped from its tip, she already felt the wound closing.

Her opponent stood paralyzed by fear and disbelief; Eden should have been dead. She shrugged and took a swipe that sent him flying into the terrace wall. He gurgled in a death rattle as he slid to the ground.

"Holy Earth," Kevon uttered his amazement like a soft prayer.

It was time he knew. "What are you waiting for? Get out!" Eden commanded.

"Huh?"

To make her point, she lifted the iron barricade that imprisoned the Huaorani and heaved it aside without even a huff, an effort that would have required ten men.

Kevon tested the bars in front of him and then, to his surprise, bent them wide enough to pass through. He stepped outside, dumbstruck.

As Lorenzo and Charlie rose to their feet, Eden took in their emaciated figures with anger; even portly Charlie had grown thin. And yet when she offered them her fresh kill, they returned blank stares. She had forgotten, just for an instant, the great divide that separated her from humans.

"Suit yourselves," she said.

They hurried to gather up the fallen warriors' weapons, then stood poised to run. Lorenzo glanced over his shoulder and thanked her before they left. *"Gracias, Eden."*

The familiarity of her name and the fondness with which he said it puzzled her. Who was Eden Newman now? She just couldn't think about it now.

She squatted beside the dead soldiers and set upon her dinner. Kevon appeared beside her, a sly smile on his lips.

"You're stronger—we're stronger—than Bramford, aren't we?" he asked with glee.

Eden gave Kevon a determined stare. "Never forget, he's El Tigre." She tossed a bloody heart to him and tried to change the subject. "Why help the Maquis, Little Brother?"

"Wait." Kevon's words rolled out like small silver pinballs that lit up his eyes. "The spear...your back...the poison dart...my neck. We should both be dead, Eden. So...the plant...made us...immortal?"

She shrugged, hoping to downplay the idea. "Something like that."

"It's amazing!" he cried.

Unable to resist Kevon's peals of laughter, Eden joined him, and their throaty sounds filled the night air. Only they

understood the secret pleasure of their unique freedom. That it should happen to two rejects...well, it only deepened the bond Eden felt with him.

Finally Kevon sucked in a sharp breath. "They can't stop me now."

"Who?" Eden asked, her pleasure gone dead.

"The FFP—they sent me here to die. I overheard my superior talking to her aide. They never thought I'd survive the jungle. They wanted to get rid of me."

"Why did they let you join in the first place?"

Hatred oozed from Kevon's pores. "My mother knew someone high up the chain. Who knows what favors she traded. She hates me, her Pearl mistake."

So his mother was a Coal. "But I thought she was dead?" Eden asked.

He averted his eyes. "Dead to me. I haven't seen her in years."

If Kevon had lied about his mother's death, it was understandable. In the tunnels, a lie might be all that stood between you and death.

"Sorry." Eden didn't want to pry further.

But he rushed on, his story spilling out of him like a bottle uncorked. "My mother called me a disgusting half-breed. She only kept me to spite my father. She claimed he betrayed her, but I bet she lied." Deep anguish filled his voice. "I never knew him, I never knew my father."

"Sorry," Eden repeated.

A wicked gleam came into Kevon's eyes. "I'm going to kill her and her kind. That's why I'm leaving with the Maquis. Come with me, Sis. We can change the world."

"That's not the way, Kevon, trust me."

"It's my way. Will you come?"

"I'm staying here."

He sneered. "For Bramford?"

"Forget the past, Brother. This is our home now."

"Your home, Eden." He threw down the bloody meat and shook his head. "What a waste, we could have been a great team." Heading towards the brush, he made a final plea. "If you change your mind, we leave tomorrow."

Eden tossed a bone aside, and it clattered on the stones. This was not good news. Kevon's deep resentment, combined with his awesome power, made him dangerous. If he returned to the tunnels with the Maquis, he could supply the Pearls with the DNA for adaptation. And then would the war to end the world begin?

Hurrying on her mission, Eden circled the village, approaching from the lake. Silver moonlight laddered across the slow ripples of water, casting a peaceful glow. Underneath the surreal sheen, she sensed a quiet menace. Her eyes darted along the shore until she found the source: A lone figure sat in a chair on the wooden dock, silhouetted by a yellowish flare.

What menace did Adam Kirby possibly present?

Zeroing in, Eden was surprised to see him reading a paperback book. Books were rare in the tunnels, and she wondered where he had gotten it. The studious image jarred her image of a brutal terrorist and whetted her curiosity.

He had washed and now wore a black T-shirt with camouflage pants. Lean and muscled, his shoulders strained against the cloth. His tousled blond hair fell at a rakish angle across his brow. The swath of light highlighted the taut planes of

his cheeks, lending drama to his handsome face. Kirby might have a twenty-seven percent mate-rate, Eden guessed, the highest limit for a Pearl.

As a member of the Maquis, he lived outside the laws of the Uni-Gov, always one step away from death. But then, most Pearls lived on the edge. Unlike them, he could never strive for ordinary things: a steady supply of oxy, a simple living unit, or even a mate and child. Some greater need must drive him.

What do you want, Kirby?

The gentle lap of water against the dock covered the sound of Eden's approach. "What are you reading?" she said in a husky voice.

Kirby jerked forward and knocked over the torch, which sent a flutter of light over the water before he righted it. Frosty eyes sent daggers in her direction. But as Kirby took Eden in, his face brightened.

"*The Prince*," he said. "Do you know it?

As he leaned forward to show her the dog-eared book, she caught his clean, sharp scent: sunset on a brisk winter's night. She quickly pushed aside the pleasant but unwanted association.

"No," Eden replied.

"The author, Machiavelli, believed that leaders should be chosen for their reason and intellect, and not because of popularity."

She shifted her weight against a wooden post. "Are you saying that reasonable, intelligent men aren't susceptible to greed?"

"There are still good people in the world."

"And you're one of them?"

"What do you think?"

"I'd say you're ambitious, Lieutenant." Eden looked deep into his eyes, fascinated by their cool gray color. "And dangerous."

Kirby smiled with effort, his features rearranging themselves like wary combatants. The gesture struck her as a small but rare gift, a peek inside the real man. In that brief instant she spied something familiar, something every Pearl knew: loneliness.

"Dangerous?" he said. "That's a compliment coming from you, Eden Newman."

"You know my name. I suppose you know what happened."

"Your eighteenth birthday weeks away, the threat of death hanging over your head, a highly-rated young Coal showers you with attention—any Pearl in your situation would have fallen under Jamal's spell. Look at it this way: if you hadn't told the FFP about your father's technology, the Maquis would never have found out either."

A woeful sigh escaped Eden. Would she carry this guilt for the rest of her life?

She looked out over the lake, where a night heron glided up the bars of moonlight. "When I first grasped the scope of my father's work," she said in a heavy voice, "I dreamed it could save the Pearls. I imagined a world without race wars or oppression. A new species, united." Eden felt the old excitement bubbling inside her and clamped it down.

She looked back at Kirby, banishing her hopes. "You know the rest. It was naïve to think they'd ever let us adapt."

"Us?" Kirby said with a trace of irony. "We're not so different, you and I. Two Pearls trying to survive."

Oh, they were plenty different. Eden bet he'd been born with the bloodthirsty nature of a predator. She was still new to the game.

"The technology is a double-edged sword," she said. "We'll survive The Heat, only to kill each other with our new strength."

Like love, she thought. *Once it opens your heart, it can kill you.*

Kirby unleashed a scattershot attack of possibilities. "But what if the Maquis controlled the technology? If we adapted and multiplied rapidly, couldn't we force the Coals to accept us before they adapted too? Imagine what it would be like if your dream came true."

For a moment Eden did just that. The dream tugged at some deep part of her she thought she had left behind. The bitter resentments and brutal injustices of the past still burned in her gut like slow dying embers. Even if she lived a hundred years in the jungle, she would never forget what it was to be a lowly Pearl.

But Eden had a new dream now. The last thing she wanted was to return to the dark, overheated world of the tunnels.

"That's a lot of ifs, Kirby."

"There's one more," he said with anticipation. "The biggest obstacle of all."

She waited for him to continue, but the seconds ticked by in silence. Oh, he knew how to play her, all right. Eden conceded a small grunt. *Go on.*

Kirby cocked an eyebrow importantly. "Given the chance, the Pearls are afraid to adapt and will refuse."

"What?" Eden exclaimed. "It's the only thing that can save them!"

"I agree," he said in a seductive voice. "And if they saw you, you could convince them. You're a fine example, the only one of our kind. We need you, Newman. We can be a team. What else are you going to do? Stay here alone?"

"I'm not alone," she said icily.

"Rebecca has certain rights, don't you agree?"

"Do you intend to divide Bramford and me?" Eden glanced at the book in his hand. "Is that what Machiavelli advises, divide and conquer?"

He chuckled. "Our reports remarked on your intelligence. I'm glad to see that didn't change when you became such—" and here he drew the words out like a snake rising in the air, "—a magnificent creature. I didn't realize how breathtaking adaptation could be."

To her chagrin, Eden found herself wondering how other Pearls would react to her. *Eden Newman, savior?*

The clever Pearl seemed to read her mind. "Emily Dickinson had fantasies of changing the world," he said, pausing for effect.

She felt naked, as if he had looked through her personal drawer back in the tunnels—and he probably had.

"Didn't you know?" he added. "Your adopted aunt was a terrorist at heart. She cut against convention her whole life,

but lacked the courage to speak her mind, except in poems she kept hidden in a locked box: 'How martial is this place / Had I a mighty gun / I think I'd shoot the human race / And then to glory run!'"

Eden had never heard those lines before, but she could imagine why her mother had not shared them. Emily Dickinson a terrorist? The idea shook up Eden's view of her aunt and her poetry.

Kirby reached forward and took her hand. Confused, Eden didn't fight him, nor the strange, pleasing sensation of his touch. He spoke intimately, like an old friend. "All Dickinson had was her pen. Think what you possess, Newman. With your adaptation and experience in the lab, you could change us, and save our dying world. Your father is old now. Are you ready for the challenge?"

Leave Bramford? Never.

Lieutenant Kirby was no friend of hers. Eden snapped back her hand, angry with herself for letting him dig into her mind. He was more dangerous than she thought.

Just then she heard a painful moan coming from a half-tumbled adobe house that bordered the lake. Without another word, Eden went to investigate. Moonlight flooded through the open doorway, casting a waxy glow.

As Eden entered, María looked up from the bedside where Johan Iverson lay ill. Her face appeared in calm contrast to his sickly green pallor. Mac and Ian, his two aides, slept nearby on the floor, snoring.

"Sirocco took him," Iverson mumbled.

"Doesn't sirocco mean a dessert wind?" Eden asked no one in particular.

"The baby. Sirocco took the baby. Lost."

She approached his bedside. "What baby, Commander?"

"He's delirious," Kirby said, coming beside her.

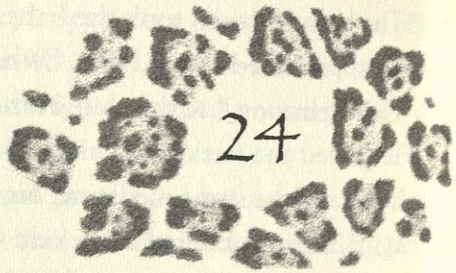
He pulled the flask from his pack and held it to the frail man's lips. "Take some medicine, Sir," he said.

Again Eden wondered at the odd smell that came from the flask. After a few sips Iverson closed his eyes and fell quiet.

Now Eden noted that the yellow color of the poultice on his chest. Why hadn't María used the highly effective Newman's Cure? She shot her friend a questioning look.

"No es necesario," María said.

'It's not necessary' could mean the patient was beyond hope, and perhaps the poultice Maria had used offered simple comfort. Or more likely, the outsiders must never know about the sacred plant, or this last patch of rainforest would be lost forever, and Mother Earth along with it. No matter what the cost, Eden must never let that happen.



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A FLOCK OF DOVES fluttered in protest in the communal yard in back of the adobe house. As Eden looked through the back door to see what had disturbed them, she heard Bramford's growl in the near distance. Already soft fingers of dawn stroked the air. She had not meant to stay away from his lair for so long. Had he discovered her absence and come to find her?

Then Rebecca's cheery voice floated out from the next house. "Hello, Ronson," she cooed. "I was hoping you'd return. Logan is asleep now. We can spend some time alone and get reacquainted."

"I need to talk to you," he said gruffly.

Eden rose onto the balls of her feet, poised to crash their little party. Why hadn't he told her he planned to see Rebecca? Any fear of cosmic payback vanished; she was going to kill that manipulative Pearl.

As Eden lunged, Kirby wrapped himself around her. "Wait, listen," he whispered.

"Get off," she hissed, dragging him along.

"Here's your chance to find out how Bramford really feels. Or are you afraid to face the truth?"

Was she?

Eden halted. Information was power. She might gain an advantage, but over whom? She trusted Bramford, she really did. But she feared his noble character would prevent him from seeing Rebecca's evil nature.

So Eden stood frozen to the spot, not even bothering to unleash the wild-eyed Pearl who clung to her. She strained to hear her husband and his ex above the hammering of her heart.

"Isn't he a sweet boy, our son?" Rebecca said in a high, nervous voice. "I only wish that...I'm sorry I missed...well, you've done a fine job in my absence." Her voice caught with a stifled sob.

A tense silence hung in the air. Eden imaged Bramford full of regret and sent him a silent plea. *Don't let her play you!*

As the hush deepened, she grew alarmed. Each rustle or sigh tortured her. Did Bramford look at Rebecca in that naked way that Eden claimed for herself? Had he reached out to touch the girl?

A frustrated grunt escaped her lips, and Kirby clamped his hand over her mouth. "Shhh!"

Rebecca laughed suddenly, her emotional twists too rapid for Eden to follow. "I must admit," she said. "You took me by surprise, Ronson."

"I could say the same about you," Bramford answered with uncharacteristic playfulness. "I thought you were dead."

At least that was true! How could Eden have ever doubted him?

"Well, I'm very much alive," Rebecca said, her voice low and seductive. "At least you're glad, I hope."

"A child needs a mother."

"And you? Aren't you glad to see me, even a little?"

"I never wanted to hurt you, you know that."

Once more the wily girl switched gears. "I saw Holo-Images of your amazing transformation—the whole world has! Why, you're more famous now than ever. But honestly, the images don't do you justice—"

"Do I frighten you?" Bramford interjected.

"No, darling. You thrill me. I can't imagine a more exciting and perfect change. You always were such an animal."

Bramford laughed. The Fool let down his defenses.

"I guess I've changed too," Rebecca said, obviously fishing for compliments. "You don't know how hard it's been on me. Tell the truth: I look terrible, don't I?"

"No," he said with a hitch in his voice. "You're as beautiful as ever."

Eden bit down on Kirby's finger without thinking. As her sharp teeth broke the skin, the spurt of salty blood in her mouth quickened her pulse.

"Mother," Kirby quietly swore.

The overwhelming need to feed hit her hard. As adrenaline rushed through her, Eden grabbed his shoulders, ready to clamp her jaws on his neck. His eyes widened in fear, the color draining from his face.

Lost your cool, Lieutenant?

Only the sound of Bramford's inquisitive bark stopped Eden. If he found her here like this, he would think she didn't trust him. Finally she pushed Adam away. He stumbled backwards, arms wheeling, and fell against the wall.

For whatever reason, Bramford ignored the disturbance

and continued talking to Rebecca with more reserve now—thank Earth. "Why did you come back?"

"I told you," she answered, all sweetness and light. "I missed you and our son. I never wanted to leave you, but they were going to kill my father. What choice did I have?"

"You could have trusted me, for one thing."

How many times had he asked the same of Eden? She wondered if he had been as secretive in his past relationship as he was with her. Rebecca launched an immediate attack, which, to Eden's dismay, uncomfortably echoed her own complaints.

"What did you expect?" she said. "How could I have placed my faith in a man who wouldn't even reveal the coordinates of our location, and..." with a deep sigh she let loose the real stinger, "...never told me about the defect in his genes? For Earth's sake, you ask too much of people, Ronson. Don't you see? If you had trusted *me*, perhaps things might have been different."

Eden detected the churning emotions beneath Bramford's even tone as he questioned his ex. He was resisting her obvious manipulations, but just barely. "What about you—you didn't tell me, either. Didn't you know you carried the albinism gene? There's no point in lying now. I want the truth, Rebecca."

She threw the blame back in his face. "Why would I mention it? If only one of us were a carrier, the risk of having an albino child would be practically nil. I'm a Pearl with a low mate-rate. For Earth's sake, you should have assumed I had a defective genome. But you—a top-rated Coal! It nev-

er crossed my mind that you had the ultimate defect. Who would ever imagine that the great Ronson Bramford needed to falsify his genome?"

A stunned silence floated in the air. Eden hated to admit that she might have told the same lie as Rebecca. Any Pearl on the cusp of eighteen and facing death might lie to gain a mate like Bramford.

The sound of Rebecca crying added to her image as the injured party. She spoke through her tears. "Do you really think I would have risked giving birth to a Cotton? What mother would be so heartless?"

Eden heard a sharp thud come from Rebecca's house. She glanced at Kirby, who watched her from the floor. He held up his hand to caution her.

Bramford spoke as if through clenched teeth. "Get up, Rebecca."

Was she kneeling at his feet, pressed against him, her arms wrapped around his legs? Why didn't he push her away? Eden shut her eyes, hoping to hear something that would ease her pain. Instead, Rebecca's tear-stained pleas intensified.

"Oh, Ronson! You were right about everything. I should have listened to you. I was afraid. You don't know what it's like to be a Pearl! If I had told the truth, you would have rejected me. Admit it. And I wanted you more than life itself. You were like a dream. How could I know that we would make such a terrible mistake?"

"Logan is no mistake," Bramford said with a hard edge.

Rebecca caught her breath. "I only meant he was in danger of being killed. You know it's true. You can't deny you were as shocked as I was at his birth."

"Get up!"

"You must listen. When Logan was born I realized that the FFP must have known about your genome all along. They used me. Logan didn't stand a chance; they would hunt him down and kill him. And once the FFP proved you were a carrier, they would ruin you and claim your wealth. It seemed a fair trade—our damned son for our freedom."

"Holy Mother Earth!" Bramford exclaimed.

"I loved you more than him. Is that a crime?"

"Let go, Rebecca."

Eden pictured Bramford's set jaw, the steely look in his eyes. Just as she had hoped, Rebecca had revealed her true ugly self.

The girl rattled on, apparently still stuck like glue to Eden's husband. "You can't imagine how devastated I was when you refused to save me. I thought…I thought you cared."

Bramford exploded. "He's my son! I couldn't trade him for you."

"After all we'd been through, you abandoned me," Rebecca cried. "You left me at the mercy of Coal terrorists. They imprisoned me for a year, still hoping to use me against you. And I never betrayed you, though they tried to tempt me."

"You knew nothing."

"And whose fault was that?"

"And yet you slipped through their hands. How?" Bramford demanded.

"When the Maquis raided the prison outpost and freed me along with the other prisoners, I took refuge with them."

"Blessed Earth! So you told the Maquis about Logan's condition. You betrayed us once again!"

"I wanted to help him."

"Liar!"

Rebecca let out a weary sigh. "It's true I've always lied," she said with resignation. "It's the one thing I'm good at. Most Pearls are, even your she-cat. No matter how different she looks, believe me, underneath those dark spots she's still a Pearl, as devious as the rest of us."

Eden's eyes flew open. Her breath caught in her chest.

"Leave her out of it," Bramford demanded.

Rebecca sounded too smug. "We're still mates, you know."

"Can't you see? I'm not the man you once knew."

"I've forgiven you for your lies, Ronson. Why can't you forgive me?"

"I already forgave you. But we're finished, Rebecca. I've begun a new life. I have a new partner, one of my own kind."

Eden's limbs went soft with relief, until she heard Rebecca's tart reply.

"In that case Logan belongs to me. And I'm taking him home."

"Never," Bramford hissed. "Logan will adapt like me."

"You're an outlaw, remember—in no position to make demands. I have other plans for the boy."

Eden heard a sudden heavy movement, then Rebecca yelped in pain. "Stop it! You're hurting me."

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Bramford said.

"If you weren't so selfish you'd see that a Cotton could rally the Pearls. He's more valuable as he is than if he adapts!"

"What?"

"That's right. Let the Pearls see how the Uni-Gov has lied to them, how even the palest among us can survive. I'm taking him back, and we're going to fight against the Coals."

Bramford sounded incredulous. "You'd use your own son as a political tool? Deny him the means to survive?"

"What are you offering him?" Rebecca asked. "A life in the jungle, as a beast? Back home he'd be somebody. His life would have purpose and meaning." For once she sounded thoughtful, as she added, "Sometimes I wonder whether Logan's life was meant to be."

Eden thought of the Aztecs' plan for her future son. Didn't Bramford see that it wasn't so different from Rebecca's plan for Logan?

She guessed that he released her when the girl gasped with relief.

He grew weary now. "Why should I believe anything you say, Rebecca?"

She answered with saccharine sweetness. "Please, for Logan's sake, forget the past, give me another chance. I want to be a good mother to my son—he needs me, and I need him. Or else..." She took a significant pause. "Let me adapt, and I'll stay here with you and him."

"Are you serious?"

"Why not? I'm tired of being afraid. Besides," Rebecca added with an alarming purr, "I want to be like you. I want to be your she-cat, Ronson."

The whole world seemed to dangle on a thin, taut thread as Eden waited for Bramford's reply. She hadn't felt this afraid even when in the death squeeze of an anaconda. The

sudden sound of her husband's raspy laugh lifted her breath out of her body.

"There was a time when I might have believed you," he told Rebecca. "In fact, I came here tonight to give you a second chance to be a mother to our son if you could live peacefully among us."

"But you must see that I've changed."

"I believe that in some part of your twisted mind you think you're telling the truth. But like I said, I'm different now. I'm El Tigre. The spirit world said you were sent here to test me. This time I won't be fooled."

"Please, I beg you—"

He cut her off. "After you leave—and you will leave with the others tomorrow—you'll never see Logan or me again."

The tearful girl became a spiteful shrew. "If you think some ugly monster can dismiss me, you're dead wrong. You're nothing to me, nothing at all."

"I'm warning you, Rebecca. I'll turn you and your friends out into the jungle this minute. Without supplies, I doubt you'll last long enough to reach the transport."

"And will you tell Logan that you forced his mother to leave him behind?"

Bramford grunted. "You never wanted him. Don't use him as a weapon now; he's suffered enough." His heavy footsteps thudded on the ground.

Rebecca shouted after him. "You'll be sorry!"

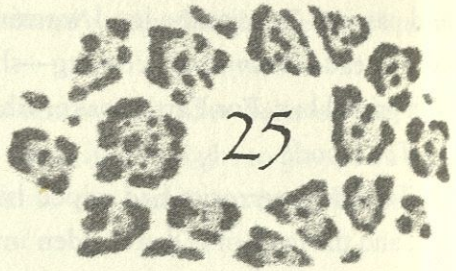
Eden's heart leapt. He was her Jaguar Man!

She rushed to meet him in the yard, but Kirby jumped on top of her again. He locked his lips onto hers, kissing her with

mad passion. Despite the loud warning voice that clanged in Eden's head—*Bramford's coming*—she responded to his kiss with primal lust. For Earth's sake, what was wrong with her?

The blood!

The tricky terrorist had wiped his bloody hand onto his lips, and the taste of it drove Eden into a wild frenzy.



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BRAMFORD'S FURIOUS growl cut like a sword through Eden's bloodthirsty stupor. Yet even as his long shadow fell over her, she continued to suck the blood from Adam Kirby's lips. Glancing up, she saw her husband's emerald eyes flash with fury in the early light of dawn.

In some old part of her human mind, she understood that he was jealous. But the idea ran smack into her natural instinct to feed. Didn't he understand that?

Only when Rebecca raced out to the yard and took in the scene with a vengeful smile, Eden realized it looked as if she was kissing Kirby! She flung him aside at once.

Turning to Bramford, she pleaded in a way that reminded her of Rebecca's nauseating pleas. "It's not what you think," Eden said. "He tricked me!"

She reached for Bramford's hand, but he jerked away. The rejection hurt more than if he had hit her—she almost wished he had. Anything but the damning look in his eye.

Rebecca gloated. "Now do you believe me, Ronson? Once a Pearl, always a Pearl."

As Eden took a swipe at her, Bramford jumped between the two shrieking girls, and she scratched his chest. He looked

from the budding, bloody welts up to her. The pained message in his eyes cut her deep: *I thought I knew you.*

From behind his shoulder Rebecca accused Eden. "Admit it, you only adapted to save yourself. You don't care for him or my son."

Eden begged Bramford. "Let's leave right now, just you and me. You were right. We don't need anyone else."

"And Logan?"

"Yes, yes, of course, we'll take him too." But it sounded like an afterthought that only proved Rebecca's point.

Suddenly the boy walked out to the yard in a sleepy daze. All eyes turned to him as an embarrassed silence fell over the group. Logan wore only a pair of black shorts. In the rosy light his translucent skin and pink eyes had an otherworldly glow.

"Mother?" he said. "Are you leaving again? Did I do something wrong?"

Kneeling beside him, Rebecca placed her arm around his small shoulders. Her affection seemed practiced, as if she had slipped on a brand-new garment that fit but looked stiff.

"Don't worry, Son," she said. "I won't leave you, not ever again."

Eden felt the deep emotional conflict that waged inside Bramford as if it were her own. How could the love goddess fail to assuage her lover's pain, or prove her love for his child?

She tried again. "Bramford, please—"

"Not now," he hissed. Ignoring her, he fixed his gaze on Rebecca. "Do you really want to adapt?"

"Well," she replied, caught off guard. "Eventually."

"Do it now, or never—I really don't give a damn. Either way, my son stays with me. That's your choice."

"Yes, Mother," Logan said. "Say that you'll stay."

As Rebecca rose to face Bramford, an enigmatic smile played over her lips. "I guess I'll stay," she said.

Over my dead body, Eden thought.

To her surprise, Lieutenant Kirby squared off with his treacherous comrade. "Traitor!"

What awful bargain had Rebecca broken? Glaring at him with disdain, she spit out her words. "I owe you nothing!"

"You bitch!" Adam slapped her across the cheek.

As she reeled backwards, Logan cried out. "Mother!"

With a mere flick of his wrist, Bramford sent the lieutenant flying across the yard. "Touch her again, and I'll kill you," he said.

Eden stared at her husband as if seeing him for the first time. He turned to her, offering but a steely mask. Where had the love in his eyes gone?

"What?" he said.

"Please," she said. "You can't do this."

"If that traitor Kevon can adapt, then why not my son's mother?" He swept past Eden without a soft glance or tender touch. "I'm sure the good doctor will agree."

"Bramford, wait!" She moved like the wind and leapt in front of him.

He jerked back in surprise. Once more her speed puzzled him, and now she wished she had confessed the extent of her transformation. If only they could find some quiet time, she would explain everything. Then the unthinkable crossed her

mind: If her father adapted Rebecca, he might also give her extraordinary powers.

Eden strained to control the emotion that burbled in the back of her throat. "Don't you see, Bramford? They're trying to divide us. You know I would never deceive you."

He sounded grave. "This is beyond us now. I'm not just a man—"

"You're my mate!"

"I'm El Tigre! I have obligations." Once more he turned to leave.

"Father!" Logan called out in panic. He ran to Bramford's side and tugged at his hand. "Please, don't go."

Bramford gazed at Eden, as he caressed the boy's head. "It's all right. I'm here with you, Son."

She ached to touch her mate, but the short distance across the yard seemed too far to cross, even for a goddess. The hurt between them rippled like the first rays of light that wavered on the lake.

How easily a heart was broken.

Eden sprang away, her repeated growls punching the air like a fighter's jabs in the ring. Cosmic payback or not, she would do whatever it took to stop Bramford's ex from adapting into a she-cat and digging her claws deeper into him.

Faster than she thought possible she flew towards the pyramid. Reaching the top in record time, she realized once more that the recent struggle had sharpened her prowess. Would her power endlessly grow with adversity or was there some finite point at which it would remain fixed?

Eden accosted her father inside the makeshift lab. "By

all rights, I could forbid you to be here. After all, this is my temple."

He looked up from his small worktable with a lazy smile. "Ah, Daught," he said, slurring his words. "At last, time to take your measurements."

From his placid stupor and languid pose, she guessed he had procured more of Newman's Cure and was now cycling down from his high. Had the astrologer given it to him to produce another Jaguar Goddess in case Eden turned out to be the wrong choice?

"Father, have you considered taking your own measurements?" she said.

He peered at her through his smudged glasses. "I'm not sure what you mean?"

"Why don't you adapt? Then you'd understand the process from the inside out."

And maybe me too.

"What?" He blinked at her. "I must remain objective, you see?"

"Mother said you wanted to understand the world. What better way than to become one of your own subjects?"

His eyes grew teary, his voice morose. "Lily was very perceptive. I wish we had talked more. I'm afraid I never knew her, although it seems she knew me better than I know myself."

Me, too. If only Eden could reach across time and have one of those heart-to-heart talks she once had dreaded.

"Well?" she said.

Her father focused on an antiquated computer, where a

series of calculations moved across the screen, possibly working out the answers to mankind's future in their squiggly depths. "For now, I have been given a different task," he replied. "I speak of Logan, whose albinism presents a particular challenge."

He was all cool detachment now, his mood swinging like a yo-yo, his words crisp and clear. "However, your question suggests a new degree of detachment from me as your parent. I suspect that more and more you will lose touch with human emotions. Ah, what a great relief that must be. I often argued with your mother about the advisability of certain emotional influences to which she subjected you. Namely, that hysterical aunt of hers."

"Emily Dickinson?"

"That's the one. A highly neurotic spinster suffering from the lack of natural sexual release." He shuddered. "Did you know that she often tied her worthless poems to a string and lowered them through a window to her guests? The silly woman must have been afraid of leaving the house—agoraphobic, most likely."

Eden didn't know that, but she could easily understand the impulse to hide away from people.

"You argued with Mother about Aunt Emily?" she asked.

"Often, I'm afraid." A twinge of regret broke through his placid demeanor. "Looking back, it hardly seems to matter."

She imagined how this attack must have hurt her mother. Once upon a time Eden might have agreed with him, but now her hybrid state gave her a better appreciation of her mother's belief in an intelligent, loving hand that moved the universe.

At the same time she understood more clearly than ever the value of her father's critical point of view.

"Balance," Eden said, grasping what her parents had given her. She flicked away a syringe that lay on the table and it clattered onto the floor. "And that's exactly what you need, Father. Even too much of a good thing can destroy you."

He furrowed his brow. "Following your line of reason, I must conclude that a life spent in the singular pursuit of one subject—in my case, evolutionary science—is less valuable than a multidimensional approach. For example, should one aspire to the centuries-old concept of a Renaissance man, who knew a little about a lot? On the other hand, the specialist—"

"I was referring to your excessive drug use."

Growing agitated, he shot to his feet. "I told your mother those stupid poems have not advanced man's survival one iota!"

"Calm down," Eden said, staring at him as though through a long lens. "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps your experiments are more valuable than Aunt Emily's little poems. But I know one thing is true: If mankind had not forsaken love, or as Mother used to say, forgotten that we are our brothers' keepers, then we wouldn't be in such dire need of your experiments."

She had a startling vision of herself standing at the balance point of the world, able to tip the long arm of hatred in favor of love and peace. Her mother's transcendent beliefs, Aunt Emily's heartfelt poetry—whether or not she was a terrorist or an agoraphobic—the shocking sacrifice of Yolo's life, every petty and large injustice Eden had suffered and,

mostly, the love she felt for Bramford all pointed to an unacceptable destiny.

Save the Pearls?

But Eden would never leave Bramford. She couldn't even think about it.

"You're coming with me," she said, sweeping her father off his feet. She balanced him on one shoulder and headed outside.

"Daught!" He wrapped his leg around her shoulder, his hands clutching her head. "Where are we going?"

"To my cave."

"How unusual. Typically the male cat claims the cave. I wonder if it's an effect of your added powers."

"A goddess can have whatever she wants."

Eden would have to find a remote cave—and quickly, before Bramford began searching for them. As long as she kept her father hidden away, Rebecca could not adapt.

As she carried her father down the pyramid steps, Eden saw the redheaded twins, Mac and Ian, enter the square. They held their laser guns ready as they advanced. Through the dim morning shadows her keen eyes noted the red tinge of their skin and their grim determination. They must have contracted The Heat and, therefore, had little to lose.

Adrenaline sped through her veins, priming her instinct to attack. In the predatory part of her brain she visualized a fight with the soldiers, anticipating each possible move with the expertise of a chess master. She would win—despite their lasers. Even those could not kill her now.

But her father would die in a heartbeat.

Evade, she told herself, and raced to the edge of the forest,

her snapping growl echoing across the ancient pavers. The twins hesitated with a sharp glance in her direction. Surprisingly, they continued towards the pyramid.

Huh? Didn't they see that she had stolen the prize—her father? Perhaps they were going to steal valuable artifacts that would help fund the terrorists' illicit operations.

Eden ventured into an area of virgin forest where her scent would be hard to track. Eventually Bramford would pick it up, but by then she hoped to win him back.

As she carried her father deep into the steamy jungle, she began to relax. Time moved at a slower pace here, each moment stretched and offered a banquet of delights. The variegated green mosaic of trees, the dank, fertile earth, the small bird's nest that peeked out from a moss-covered bough—this reality moved to center stage in her mind, while her worries scurried to the wings. She felt the world around her as though it were an extension of her body.

Indeed, she was a "strange cat girl," as Rebecca had said. But if she also considered Bramford an "ugly monster," did she really want to adapt?

Eden couldn't think about it. Such complexities hurt her animal brain.

After a while her father pointed to an arch of stone hidden under a tangle of vines. "Is that your cave, Daught?"

Why not? The place was empty, and he would be safe enough.

"It's for the best," she said, setting him inside the deep opening. "I'll check on you tomorrow after the Maquis have left."

"Not till then?" He paled. "But my medicine..."

"Yes, well, think of it as an opportunity to break your addiction."

Hurrying behind a clump of tall ferns Eden left her scent, then added other makers, creating a perimeter of defense to guard him from predators. How long ago it seemed when Bramford had done the same for her. Truly, time was relative.

Eden picked a handful of Brazil nuts and scooped water from a small pond into a large palm leaf. Returning to the cave, she wedged the supplies into the cleft of a rock. Her father was on his knees, gently scraping clay-colored fungi from the moldy wall. The prospect of being alone in the jungle did not seem to faze him at all.

She offered reassurance anyway. "Don't worry. You'll be all right here."

Her father held up a fan-shaped mushroom that gave off the noxious smell of a sewer. He showed no reaction to the odor, but studied it with great interest.

"I don't recognize this beauty," he said. "The shape is similar to that amazing missed opportunity, *pestalotiopsis microspora*. Can you imagine, a fungus capable of breaking down and digesting any object made from plastic?" He shook his head. "One of the colossal blunders of all time. If not for ignorant politicians who controlled the purse strings, scientists would have used a simple but potent mushroom to gobble up the waste that destroyed so much of the planet."

As he tested the mushroom's nubby surface with the tip of his tongue, Eden shouted, "Be careful. It might be poisonous or hallucinogenic."

"I suspect it may yield something vastly more interesting than a simple chemical alteration to my personal reality."

She sighed. "Just don't get hooked on it."

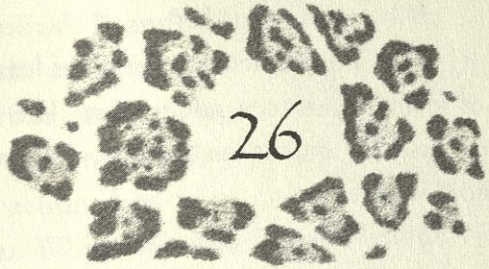
He slanted a knowing look over the mushroom's domed top. "I am merely doing fieldwork."

"Denial is another sign of addiction, Father."

Eden turned to study the area. The morning sun cut through the thick net of trees. No predators lurked about. He would be fine, wouldn't he?

"Whatever you do, don't leave," she added.

"Yes, yes," he murmured, as he nibbled at the mysterious mushroom.



EDEN CUT THROUGH the jungle, heading towards Heaven's Gate. She had one day in which to discover the Maquis' real aims. And she suspected that Commander Iverson could shed some insight on the situation, if only he were well enough to talk.

Should she risk the secret of Newman's Cure to heal him? Eden thought of the ecstatic image of Xochipilli holding the plant in her hand. Perhaps the goddess of love had the right to use it as she thought best.

How did her life become so complicated, anyway? And yet, despite the difficulties, she was not really unhappy, though she was not exactly happy, either. She simply was, and that was enough for now.

Only when her desire for Bramford flared, bringing with it a crush of hot emotions, her equanimity faltered. Then sorrow and regret crept into her being. Feelings were dangerous, just as she had always suspected.

By the time Eden reached the rocky cliffs where Newman's Cure grew, a bank of storm clouds covered the sky gray. The air hung dense and still before the coming storm. And yet, the plant's silvery leaves trembled, and a tingling vibration ran underfoot.

What could that be?

Then Eden spied a column of leafcutter ants running out of formation into a pile of dirt. The ever-present cacophony of nature's chorus died away. The whole world seemed to hold its breath.

Something was very wrong.

A loud, metallic buzz suddenly ripped through the air. Eden looked up into the leaden sky, fearing the worst, and there it was: a stealth air ship that bore the red-and-black logo of Bramford Industries flew towards the Aztec village.

Iverson had said they would rendezvous tomorrow with the transport in the lowlands. But that was before Kirby took charge. Someone must have given him a Life-Band to change the pick up point and time. Was that what Kevon had meant?

—I've got some business to take care of.

"Oh, no," Eden moaned.

As the scream of engines reached a blistering pitch, forest animals—mice and monkeys and iguanas—fled in terror down the mountainside. The awful shrieks and cries of birds and beasts rose up in protest only to be silenced in the din. Even the siren-like sounds of howler monkeys disappeared under the relentless drone of the alien flying creature.

Eden's thoughts tripped over themselves in an effort to devise a plan. Thank Earth, she had hidden her father away. But what of Logan, who she feared would be kidnapped unless...unless—where was Bramford?

Her blood ran cold as she recalled the twins on their way to the temple. Had they ignored her and her father because they had another quarry to catch? With a start, Eden guessed

they had planned to ambush Bramford at the lab when he came on Rebecca's behalf.

Once more the horrible prophetic pictures of Bramford's fatal sacrifice loomed in Eden's mind. She cursed herself at the possibility that her actions had "cut" the future into another unwanted pattern. Why on Blessed Earth has she ever left her husband's side?

Iverson had made a polite request for help, but with that bastard Kirby running the show, the plan would undoubtedly change. She feared that the Maquis intended to force Bramford to return to the tunnels.

If taken by surprise, even El Tigre could be captured. Eden had already seen that happen once, and the memory of the FFP's attack sent a shiver through her. She had to get to Bramford before it was too late.

Poised to leap, Eden heard a whoosh sail through the air—too late. A poison dart struck her neck, followed by a numb, stinging sensation that rapidly coursed through her body. From nearby she heard footsteps retreating through the brush. She plucked out the dart and stared at it in dumb shock.

If only Father could take my vital statistics now.

Darkness and light alternated behind her eyes like sunlight playing peek-a-boo through leafy trees. Her legs wobbled, and she teetered precariously close to the edge of the cliff. A weightless feeling tugged at her.

She thought of the young prison guards she had killed and the look of mortal fear in their eyes. They must have had families who mourned them. At the time she had justified her actions, but now the killings seemed horrific—*savage and cruel!*

Cosmic payback time, Eden.

At last she lost the battle against gravity and tumbled over the edge of the cliff. From somewhere near or far, she could not tell, she heard her long, agonizing scream.

"Bramford!"

Eden lifted her head, like a diver coming up from the depths of the sea, and took in the dense, woody ravine around her. The most basic questions popped into her head: *Who am I? Where am I? What am I doing here?* For a moment the answers danced out of reach.

She pressed her hand against the warm earth and, as if stamped there, her identity returned, though it seemed too ridiculous. What kind of goddess felt so lost and humiliated?

High stalks of sugar cane, *Saccharum officinarum*, stood against a backdrop of steel-gray sky. The many broken pieces lying on top of Eden led her to believe that she had fallen through the tall grasses. From the muffled roar of the waterfall, she guessed that she lay on a plateau below Heaven's Gate. In the distance she heard a constant metallic sound beat the air like the wings of a giant wasp.

What was that?

As Eden jerked to a sitting position, a wave of nausea rolled through her. She chewed on a cane stalk for an instant rush of energy. Her tongue felt parched, a boat on dry land. Water, she needed water to flush out the poison.

She wondered why the poison dart had had a stronger effect on her than on Kevon. Perhaps the poison that had entered her bloodstream was more potent; or perhaps because she was female and her body lighter, she had metabolized

the drug faster. In any case Eden realized with dread that her weak spot, as her father had called it, might be weaker than her brother's.

But she couldn't think about that now.

Then, as she turned towards the waterfall, her memory clicked into place. *Bramford is in danger!*

Gauging the sun's movement since she fell, Eden figured that the transport had landed no more than fifteen minutes ago. Long enough to subdue Bramford and prepare for the return trip to the tunnels?

For Earth's sake, she had to reach him before the transport took him away.

Stumbling to her feet, Eden sniffed the air and headed towards the water. Her head ached; her limbs felt wooden. She clawed her way to the edge of the waterfall and, leaning over a small stream, cupped the cool water to her mouth.

For a second she thought she heard a big cat growl, but decided she had imagined it. Now as she dipped down for another drink, the unmistakable sound of a jaguar filtered through the trees. Thinking her mate had come for her, Eden turned with great anticipation.

Instead, the civet smell of a real cat hit her. The hair on the back of Eden's neck prickled. Her heart slammed hard against her chest.

She sank onto her haunches as a wild jaguar stepped out of the brush. The world seemed to sweep around them as swift as the waterfall, while they remained in a frozen pocket of time, taking each other's measure.

A young female cat stared at Eden with penetrating greenish gold eyes that gleamed in the misty light. Its russet-spotted

coat looked as smooth as satin. Primal energy seemed to funnel through the earth and sky into its lithe body.

What a magnificent creature!

Until that moment Eden had not fully appreciated the species' beauty, nor her own. From a human standpoint she knew she looked strange, as Rebecca had said. And yet the sleek, powerful cat mirrored Eden's feline form, boosting her confidence. Even Bramford, with all his lusty desire, had not been able to allay her doubts. This unexpected meeting, one she-cat to another, was a rare gift, though a deadly one.

Curiosity flickered in the jaguar's eyes, as it sniffed the humid air. No doubt the animal wondered what odd creature it had encountered. And yet, Eden sensed a familiarity between them, like running into an old childhood friend, who has changed dramatically through puberty, but still touches a deep chord.

Eden met the big cat's gaze with equal intensity and sent a silent warning, cousin to cousin: *Don't even think about it—I'm your queen!*

The jaguar's mouth twitched, almost as if a smug smile had failed to form, then slid across its snout. From deep in its chest came a haughty roar in response to Eden's challenge: *Prove it!*

Eden let loose a vicious snarl that shot like a hot arrow and hit its mark. The jaguar jerked its head back, startled. In a fraction of a second it made a decision; razor-sharp claws sprung out from the tips of its paws.

Eden's father had decided to leave out that formidable, feline trait, thinking it a poor trade-off for *Homo sapiens'* opposable thumbs. Now she regretted his lack of foresight.

How quickly would her skin heal if shredded? At some point Eden figured she would die from rapid loss of blood. Perhaps her clever human brain would make up for the lack of those bitchy nails.

Dark clouds rumbled with thunder that echoed the combined roars of Eden and her opponent. The big cat poised like a competitive runner at the starting blocks with its hips high and head how. Lightning flashed through the trees, and the threatened storm finally delivered a torrent of rain. At once the ground turned muddy, too slick for a firm foothold.

Eden's mind sharpened to a single point as brilliant and hard as a finely cut diamond. To survive—and she must survive for Bramford's sake—she pushed aside the impending danger to him and his son, the sound of the waiting transport, and even her jealous thoughts of Rebecca. Like a besotted lover, she focused every ounce of energy on the beautiful jaguar. The absolute need to taste its blood drove her to attack.

In a whirl of limbs and fur, the two females met mid-air, their jaws clashing like swords. They tumbled to the ground, snarling. Neither won the dominant spot on top, as they rolled across the wet ground.

The cat ripped its claws down Eden's back, from shoulder blade to hip, like pulling a zipper. The smell of blood—Eden's own blood—roiled in the air and drove her beyond her expectations. She broke through a hidden wall of fear left over from her days as a Pearl. As if a dam had broken, a wild river of energy coursed through her, merging streams of ancient cunning from the great stores of both man and beast.

An image of an S-shaped Victorian parlor chair flashed in

Eden's mind, something Aunt Emily might have sat in with a lover, their bodies chastely facing in opposite directions and thus protected, while they half-turned to gaze into each other's eyes. Following this instinct, Eden flipped the cat over her head so that their bodies were out of reach just like a Victorian couple on a date.

Her opponent yelped in surprise at the unexpected move. Lying there face-to-face, Eden lunged for her opponent's neck. Her lips registered the animal's pulse through the velvet coat. It beat hard and fast. A moment of regret came over her, and then she tore at the skin.

The cat's pulse surged as its blood spurted into Eden's mouth. Its four legs tread the air, but found no purchase. Life leached out of the jaguar until, at last, it lay still. As Eden jerked back, its pale eyes shot up to meet hers. A look of bittersweet sadness passed between them before the great predator gave a final shudder.

Eden thought of the god Coatlicue, whom the Huaorani believed decided what form, animal or human, you took in your next life. Would this brave cat return as a human, and would that be a reward or a punishment?

Out of respect and pride, Eden broke off a claw from the dead cat's paw, so that she would never forget its beauty, or her own. She tucked the blunt end into the edge of her skirt and stood over her kill, as changed as when she and Bramford had consummated their marriage.

Passing her hand along the wound in her back, she fingered the small ridges where her skin had already seamed together. Even these scars would disappear, she realized. She

rolled her shoulders back as if donning a brand new coat, one fit for an immortal goddess.

In a rush the drone of the transport engines drilled into Eden's brain. From deep underground in the molten rock, she drew out a fiery roar that electrified the air. Rebecca would not win, not if Eden had to fight her to the ends of Earth.

She leapt onto an outcropping of stones and began the steep climb back up the mountain. The underside of the cliff jutted like the prow on a ship over her head, rain sheering off the edge. The muddy ground provided little traction.

Using every ounce of strength, Eden gained the point just under the lip of the cliff. There she hung sideways, a thick rope of vine her only lifeline. Glancing over her shoulder through the gloom, she saw nothing but vast, empty space between her and the river far below. If she fell, her regenerative powers would protect her, but she would never reach Bramford in time.

Never see my love again? Impossible.

As Eden reached forward a runner sprang free from the dirt, sending a tremor through the main vine. Any minute it might give way, and her chance would be lost. She could not bear to think of Bramford wondering why she hadn't come for him. Like Aunt Emily, Eden would rather be broken, even dead, if she failed her greatest friend.

I should not dare to leave my friend,
Because—because if he should die
While I was gone, and I—too late—
Should reach the heart that wanted me;

If I should disappoint the eyes
That hunted, hunted so, to see,
And could not bear to shut until
They "noticed" me—they noticed me;

If I should stab the patient faith
So sure I'd come—so sure I'd come,
It listening, listening, went to sleep
Telling my tardy name,—

My heart would wish it broke before,
Since breaking then, since breaking then,
Were useless as next morning's sun,
Where midnight frosts had lain!

THROUGH THE pelting rain Eden clung to the woody vine, the only thing that stood between her and a long fall to the river below. As a stiff wind shook the teardrop-shaped rosy petals and green, waxy leaves, she suddenly recognized the vine: *Banisteriopsis caapi.*

Of all the plants she might have grabbed, it was the shaman's primary tool, the one that sent El Tigre into a spiritual realm. Also called ayahuasca, or vine of the soul, the Indians believed it had intelligence.

Was Eden imagining it, or did she really feel an extraordinary energy pulsating from the vine into her being, as if it wanted to help her gain the edge of the cliff, and reach Bramford? In fact, everything around her, from the sodden soil to the air that caressed her face, percolated with energy, willing her to succeed.

"Help me, Mother Earth," Eden prayed.

Then a second runner of the vine popped free and dangled in the wind like a broken arm. The transport's engines whined in the near distance. How long before the Maquis spirited Bramford back to the tunnels and his probable death?

Leaning forward, Eden seized an older growth of vine, careful not to put too much weight on any one part. A few

more feet and she might reach the edge of the cliff. But as a third section gave way, the entire length of the vine began to tremble in her hands.

Eden groped with one hand for another handhold and came up empty. The surrounding plants were shallow and wet, the ground giving way. She had no choice but to jump before she fell.

Risk it, or lose everything, Eden.

She heaved her body upwards like an old-time pole-vaulter, just as the last anchor in the vine pulled free. Crunching forward, she grabbed the precipice, and with a loud grunt rolled onto the plateau.

Sweet Earth!

At once she jumped to her feet and sped through the driving rain up to the ridge, where she took in the horrifying scene. The air ship hovered over the pyramid like a giant prehistoric insect. From its metallic belly a door slid open, and a gurney on two cables appeared. It swung in the stormy air as it began its descent towards Tezcatlipoca's temple below.

Eden feared the Maquis would lift Bramford onto the gurney, dead or alive. Unless she could stop them!

Her feet barely made impressions in the muddy ground as she flew down the hillside. Her heart slammed to the rhythm of the transport's fast-thumping beat. She ran onto the square with a terrifying cry, part enraged beast, part furious wife.

The villagers huddled on the wet stones, their heads bowed like flowers pelted by the rain. Huitzilopochtli held the central spot in his ornate chair, his faithful astrologer beside him. A line of intrepid warriors awaited the sun god's

command, as if wooden spears could do battle with that behemoth in the sky.

From the people's puzzled expressions, Eden realized their well-laid plans, some centuries in the making, had been ruined. This bizarre flying creature had no part in their "script."

Above the wind and the rasping engine buzz, a familiar high-pitched cry reached Eden. That pitiful sound had been seared into her brain during the FFP's attack on Bramford's camp, and no evolutionary change could ever erase it. In the shadow of Huitzilopochtli's chair, she spied Carmen and Etelvina held captive by Scroll and Paw.

The sun god and his pals would die a slow, painful death if they harmed so much as a hair on the girls' heads. But Eden would have to deal with them later. She bellowed with rage as she sped towards the pyramid.

The people turned towards her, their faces full of gratitude. They began to chant. *"Xochipilli Ocelotl, Xochipilli Ocelotl."*

Once more a wave of energy, hopeful and sustaining, filled Eden. They needed her; Huitzilopochtli did, too. At least her status as the Jaguar Goddess had been confirmed, small consolation though it was.

As a bolt of lightning lit up the gray sky, Eden saw Rebecca peering down from a window in the air ship. Her rival's sly smile goaded her to run faster. Logan poked his head out beside his mother and pounded against the glass, a tortured ghost trapped in the gloom.

Carmen's shrill scream whipped through the air. "Logan!"

The young girl slipped free of her captors. At Scroll's surprised outburst, several guards lunged for her. Fast and brave,

Carmen reached the pyramid just as Adam Kirby peered over the top through a sheet of rain. Still several yards away from the steps, Eden saw him point a laser gun at the girl.

"Stay back!" he cried.

Carmen kept running.

Please stop, Eden's heart begged.

And yet she knew Carmen could no more quit her best friend than Eden could quit her mate. Nor did the girl understand the laser's lethal danger. The people's last recollection of a modern weapon must have been a conquistador's harquebus.

When the laser blast sizzled in the air like a stream of fire, the crowd fell to the ground wailing, the soldiers too. The stiff wind had shaken Kirby's arm, and he fired at the astrologer, who toppled like a tin soldier. Huitzilopochtli stared down at his dead aide, dumbstruck.

A heinous laugh rang out as Tezcatlipoca appeared atop the pyramid against the ash-colored sky. And so the war to end the world began at last with a loud *thunk* as the gurney touched down beside him. Any minute the god of sorcery would deliver his greatest weapon of all—El Tigre—into the hands of terrorists.

"Stop!" Kirby called to Carmen, who had made it onto the steps. This time he held his arm straight as he fired at her.

Eden leapt high and landed in a crouch over the girl, shielding her from the blast. As it flamed across Eden's back, she stumbled from the force, careful not to crush Carmen. Her body temperature cooled at once, creating a hard, crystalline shell that protected her from the eviscerating heat.

Woozy, but gaining equilibrium by the second, Eden

raised her head and sent Kirby a murderous look. Any sympathy or admiration she once had for his cause evaporated.

He turned away with a shrug. From on high two more laser blasts followed, and Eden feared the worst.

As she wobbled to her feet, the Aztecs cried out in astonishment. No time to consider them, she lifted Carmen onto her back and ran up the pyramid steps.

"¡Mira, mira!" the girl cried, pointing over Eden's shoulder. *"El Tigre vuela."*

Indeed, it appeared that Bramford flew through the air on the gurney. The cables wound him closer and closer into the dark void of the air ship. Riding beside him on the edge of the gurney, Kirby waved farewell.

Bramford's arms and legs hung over the sides of the narrow cot. In the flashing light Eden saw the maguey needles embedded in his skin. They drained away his life force, just like in the sickening images on the temple wall. In a twist of fate, Rebecca had fulfilled her role, after all.

As a trickle of Bramford's blood splattered onto the steps in front of Eden, the hard rain swirled it into a pretty feathered design, even as another red trail, and then another, dropped through the air. Eden feared her mate soon would be dead.

"No!" she cried.

At last she flew over the last steps and landed at the top of the pyramid. Kevon lay wounded on the ground, with two burned streaks on his chest. The force and proximity of Kirby's laser, potent enough to kill any man, had only stopped the Jaguar Boy for the moment.

Worse yet, the emotional damage that Kirby had inflicted upon his would-be comrade had taken a toll. Kevon's eyes

searched Eden's with a haunted, broken look, like a child lost in the dark. Though her little brother equaled her in strength, maybe even surpassed her, he had a lot of growing up to do.

"How could you give Kirby a Life-Band?" Eden shouted.

The dimple in his chin quivered as Kevon spoke. "He promised. Adam promised he'd take me with them."

Eden would deal with him later too.

She set Carmen down, and with a running start, jumped onto the sacrificial stone where Yolo had been killed. Leaping into the sky, she stretched out her hand for the gurney.

The sounds of the high-pitched engines, the ratcheting of the cables, the rumbling sky fell away. A hush fell over the concourse below. Only the wind whistled in Eden's ears like an urgent warning.

Through the somber mist she drew an imaginary line from her hand to the gurney and, estimating the speed at which the fast wind pushed the transport away, realized she would never reach it. Eden slanted a glance at Kirby, whose smug smile communicated the same conclusion.

But if a Pearl could become superhuman and a mere plant could save a tribe from extinction, why should mortal logic hold sway over her heart's desire? In fact, Eden grasped the potency of pure desire. Because a subterranean layer of energy bubbled beneath the world—she believed it did, even Einstein said so—and desire provided a bridge between those two realities.

Like tumblers in a lock, the truth fell into place: One constant had kept Eden alive and brought her to this moment—desire. So fervently had she desired love, even before

she could name it, that it had come to her. And now she refused to lose it.

"Bramford!" she cried.

Dueling bolts of lightning crisscrossed the air inches away from the transport. With the change in air pressure, the air ship dropped several feet, and came within Eden's grasp. In an instant the deadly equation changed in her favor.

Seizing the nearest cable, she swung herself onto the end of the gurney. As her weight tipped it downward, Bramford's inert body slipped towards her and the yawning space below. The air ship's engines sputtered for a moment, then resumed their steady churn and even keel.

As Eden grabbed hold of her husband's leg, the warmth beneath his wet skin gave her hope he was alive.

"Bramford, can you hear me?" she cried.

He did not respond.

The panoramic view of the lake framed his body, as the stiff wind drove the air ship ever closer to the shoreline. If Eden could hang on until the transport hung over the water, she could push him off and dive in after him. It was their only chance.

As Eden's eyes cut over to the lake, understanding flooded into Kirby's face. He shouted at her through the storm. "I'll kill him before I let you take him." To prove his point, he pointed the laser gun at Bramford's head. "You decide."

Eden growled at him, her mind racing. Dead or alive, Bramford could provide the genetic material that the Maquis needed.

Kirby's weapon began to glow, ready to fire. The transport's metal doors came within inches of Eden's head, as the

cables worked the gurney upwards. Soon her drugged and dying spouse would be entombed within the ship.

The lake was still too far away. Hurry, Eden thought, wishing for a little relativity.

To gain time, she attacked Kirby's pride. "You're a traitor to your people. If you cared about the Pearls, you'd take me instead."

He laughed. "You don't have Bramford's fortune or resources. Still, it's a pity; we would have made a good team." Now he turned the laser gun on Eden. "Say goodbye, Newman."

Kirby fired at the same time Eden shook the gurney, knocking her assailant off his feet. He slid down to the platform with a loud cry, but the laser blast had singed Bramford's hair. As he shuddered at the shock or pain his eyes flew open.

Alive—Bramford alive!

His gaze locked onto Eden's, and for one moment the battering wind and the dangers at hand ceased to exist. His heart spoke to hers in a language all their own. *I love you.*

Then sorrow tugged at Bramford's features. "Go, Eden, please," he said.

"Never!" she cried.

"Trust me." His eyes pleaded with her to understand. Then, gathering his strength with a grunt, Bramford kicked her off the gurney.

Caught off guard, Eden tumbled towards the water, her heartache so huge she hoped to die. But she would survive, wouldn't she? *Without Bramford?* The cruel irony whipped around her like the violent air currents.

Eden plunged into the murky depths of the lake. The dark warm water closed over her like a silent grave, deadening the sound of the departing air ship. She felt its vibrations ripple through the water, ramping up, faster and faster, until it faded away.

Gasping for air, she shot back up to the surface, unable to resist life's greedy grasp. Her father would have said her actions proved evolution's basic principal of survival.

She cursed him then. *Earth without Father.*

Eden's heart felt like it would splinter into a thousand pieces as she searched the bleak skies for one last look at the air ship. She treaded water way past the point when it had disappeared. The waning moon cleaved the dark clouds. A light rain drizzled.

Against that final backdrop, Eden pictured Bramford's last look. *Go?* Had he really said that?

Finally she swam towards shore, numb to the terrible aches in her body. She had broken one shoulder upon impact with the water, and a few ribs. Not so long ago, the excruciating pain would have killed her. Now Eden sloughed it off as easily as the water flowed over her body.

Her phenomenal constitution had begun to stitch her bones back together. She only feared the heartbreak would never mend.

If only Eden had told Bramford about her powers, he might not have felt the need to protect her. After all the times she had accused him of not sharing, she had failed to do the same. And lost everything.

As the ground rose to meet the shoreline, Eden surfed onto the sand. Lying there, she shut her eyes tight. Unbidden,

came the memory of her sick mother folding into a chair, like a worn piece of paper, after they had seen the Maquis soldier at the station. The passion with which she had spoken burned like a flame in her eyes, as if it alone sustained her diseased body.

—We are our brothers' keepers. Universal law affects us all.

Eden hit the sandy shore with her fist. "No!"

Even as she refused, she finally bent under the responsibility—the sacred mission—placed upon her shoulders. Yolo had understood what Eden only now began to grasp. She must bring love back into the world—not just for the Pearls, but also for the Coals and all people.

Unless love belonged to everyone, it would die forever. Even Eden's love for Bramford, and that she could not bear.

A weary moan trembled from her lips, as Eden faced the thing she dreaded most. Somehow she must return to the tunnels, despite the promise she had made to Bramford.

She shook her head in disbelief at the ironic turn of events. *Me, Eden Newman, stop a great war?* Bramford's friends in the spirit world had better have a really good plan.

28

THE SOFT SUSURRUS of the water lapped at Eden's feet when she awoke at dawn. She had fallen asleep there at the lake, she realized. Now she stared at the horizon in disbelief. Would she really return to her old world to face the darkness and even war?

Underneath her anguish, like a root pushing up from the ground, thoughts of Bramford filled her with desperate need. Was he still alive, caged like a rat, or had he been killed once he had been farmed for genetic samples? If Eden dwelled on his fate, she would crumble.

She couldn't think about him. *Or could she?*

No longer a frightened Pearl, old negative habits did not serve her. Cling instead to love, she told herself. Whether or not thoughts of Bramford brought her to the brink of despair, Eden decided that thoughts of him would accompany her every waking moment.

She brushed the sand off her body and hurried towards the village. The sun broke through the eastern sky with renewed zest, reclaiming the world after yesterday's storm. Its slender golden arms reached down the small dirt road to embrace her.

Passing by the small adobe house where Johan Iverson

had lain ill, Eden heard a low moan. Startled, she headed inside. Had the Maquis really abandoned their commander?

Indeed, Eden found him alone there on the edge of death, left to his incoherent mumblings. His skin had gone slack, the cleft in his chin nearly flattened. He didn't have long to live. And where had María gone?

As Eden turned to look for her friend, her foot hit something under the bed. A metallic object skidded into view. *Adam Kirby's flask!*

The instant she saw it she knew why the flask had tugged at the back of her mind. She picked it up and turned it upside down. Empty. With a sniff at the top, Eden identified the faint trace of noxious fumes. *Poison!*

Recalling the many doses Kirby had given the old man, she guessed the lieutenant had planned to kill his superior all along. It made no sense; the Maquis were known for their fierce loyalty, a necessary survival tactic in a guerilla force.

The sudden recollection of the heated argument between Kirby and Rebecca added to Eden's suspicions. If the Pearls controlled the adaptation technology, they could defeat the FFP. But then why had Kirby been so angry at Rebecca's decision to adapt? Traitor, he'd called her.

Iverson muttered softly, his chest wheezing from the effort. Once more he sounded heartbroken about a desert wind. "Sirocco...took him."

"Hold on, Commander," Eden said. "I'll be back soon with help."

She left at once to fetch the healing plant. However, as she ran past several villagers, she stopped in her tracks. Overnight these people had become shriveled, mere skeletal versions of

their robust selves. In order to move, their stiff bodies rocked from side to side like stick insects, *Ctenomorphodes chronus*.

What now?

Eden changed course for the top of the pyramid to seek an answer. There, she found both Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca standing before the calendar stone, though if they had not worn their regal costumes, she might not have recognized them, either.

Their brown eyes, sunk into the hollows of their sockets, seared her with a cold and ancient look. A yellowish film glazed their pupils—now covered with blinding cataracts. Once glowing with bronzed vitality, their skin had faded to a papery translucence that revealed thin veins. Each leaned heavily on a carved wooden staff.

These gods were anything but terrifying. It was as if an enchantment had worn off, leaving everyone old and withered. *The miraculous effects of Newman's Cure erased?* And yet, Eden felt stronger than ever since her recent struggle with Lieutenant Kirby.

Her father might have put forth Einstein's theory of relativity as an explanation. Time crawled in this hidden place compared to the warp speed of the tunnels. The collision of the two worlds, one stuck in the past and the other lost in the future, had brought their time-space continuums into alignment with devastating results.

In other words, whether the magical effects of the plant had vanished because of the modern world's intrusion or simply because the Aztecs believed its arrival, along with the death of the astrologer, gave evidence of the gods' wrath, their world was dying.

Huitzilopochtli raised his hand with great effort and beckoned Eden. She strode across the stones, thinking how easy it would be so easy to kill them and take her vengeance. But then, wasn't she their keeper, too?

As Eden came to stand across from the decrepit duo, they began to speak at the same time. A brief, nasty exchange followed. She guessed that the astrologer had been a conduit between them, and with his death tempers would flare.

Apparently, the sun god won the argument for he continued. Pointing at the graven image of the jaguar, he called out its name. *"Ocelotl."*

Eden's eyes cut to Tezcatlipoca; the jaguar image represented him.

Huitzilopochtli shook his head and attempted to explain in Spanish. *"El Tigre."*

So he was talking about Bramford. She nodded. *Go on.*

His brilliant voice had dimmed to a scratchy whisper, like the faint light of dawn. Eden understood him even less than when he had glowed with health, and without her father to translate, she was at a loss.

The sun god uttered a frustrated grunt and tried again. Now he pointed to the flower image that belonged to Xochipilli, and then to Eden, jabbing a gnarled finger at her.

"Xochipilli," he said.

"Okay." She was the goddess of love.

He nodded. So far so good.

How ironic that a conversation with so much potential for misunderstanding might determine the fate of the world. Perhaps Huitzilopochtli also realized the situation, because

he drew his shoulders back with a shuddering effort as he continued.

One by one he went around the wheel of godly images, beginning with the flower and ending with the jaguar. He paused briefly after each to say a single word. The drawn-out sound reminded Eden of a child reciting numbers.

In fact, she realized he was counting the number of weeks between the present—the week of her namesake, Xochipilli—until the time of the jaguar, more than halfway around the circle. At last Huitzilopochtli slumped forward with exhaustion. He was finished.

Eden quickly calculated. "Fourteen of your weeks equals approximately six of our months. That's when the calendar falls again to the jaguar's reign, or Ocelotl.

"El Tigre," the sun god repeated.

"But El Tigre won't be here when his week begins. What then?" Eden asked.

Huitzilopochtli nodded, the wattle of his neck waving, and seemed to repeat the question the way a teacher might challenge a prized student with her own question.

"Can't Tezcatlipoca step in for Bramford?" she added.

The sun god let out a weary sigh, like a flicker of light in the shadows.

But no, Eden realized the god of sorcery might not live till his week rolled around again. In fact, all of the descendants of this illustrious tribe would soon disappear.

Then Huitzilopochtli produced the cornhusk doll from under his cape. It was the same one that had been used to represent her future child.

The Aztecs would die unless a savior was born, her child, no less, who would set the world right. But how would Eden conceive without her mate?

"What do I care about your problems?" she said.

In response, Huitzilopochtli slowly turned towards the blood-red walls of the sorcerer's temple and banged his staff. As Eden heard a thin, high-pitched wail from within, her heart rose up in her throat.

"Carmen!" she called out.

Scroll dragged the girl into the bright light. Her pupils were dilated, her movements sluggish—primed to die. Unlike Yolo, however, Carmen was no willing sacrificial virgin. A fighter, she seethed with anger despite her drugged state.

And this time Eden had the power to stop the barbaric rite. She growled at the sun god. "Let her go, or I'll kill you."

He showed no fear. Only a sad smile crawled across his ravaged face.

Then he looked towards Xochipilli's temple on the opposite side of the platform, just as Paw and another jaguar warrior appeared. Between them Eden saw María and her younger daughter tied and bound, the glittering ceremonial knife pointed at Etlevina's heart, the very same one that had killed Yolo. The little girl's pretty mouth puckered, terror clouding her innocent eyes. Her mother stared at the ground, her broad shoulders trembling with fear.

Eden lunged for Huitzilopochtli and gripped his neck. His eyes closed in resignation; his death solved nothing.

If she shot across the platform to save one girl, the other would die. And even if Eden could save both sisters, she could

not bring them on her journey back to the tunnels. They would die there, as surely as if they had been sacrificed. Nor could she remain here to protect them. Eden was stuck.

She released the sun god with an exasperated grunt. "What do you want?"

The old man tottered backwards, his staff skidding across the stones. He caught his balance against the sacrificial stone, and summoning his power, issued what sounded like an ultimatum.

Eden only recognized the words *Ocelotl* and *tonalpohuali.* She wanted to shake the truth out of him like fruit from a tree.

"Fourteen Aztec weeks until the jaguar's rein, what then?" she demanded.

Finally the answer cut through her mind with an edge as sharp as the dreaded knife.

"Blessed Earth, if Xochipilli brings Bramford back here before the week of jaguar begins, then Carmen and Etelvina will live. Otherwise, they die."

Eden had six months to reach the tunnels, save the world, and return here with Bramford, and his son, or the Aztecs would cut out the young girls' tender hearts. She laughed at the sheer impossibility of her task.

Satisfied with her understanding, the men retreated, taking her friends with them.

Eden stared at the intricate images of the calendar stone. Had the artist who carved them centuries ago ever imagined that his work augured the end of the world? From the first notch of his chisel to her father's experiments in adaptation,

a direct line wove through time. Like the rapid beat of a butterfly's wings in one part of the globe that creates a colossal storm far, far away, the past and the future were inextricably intertwined.

Cosmic payback connects us all.

Alone, Eden trembled before her destiny. Even a goddess would need an army, and where would she get one? To do what she must do, she must bend time to her will, as relatively as Einstein ever had imagined.

A small growl echoed from the steps below. Eden looked up to find Kevon loping towards her, his expression pained.

"I'm sorry, Eden," he said, as he came beside her.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "It's all right, Little Brother. We're going back to the tunnels."

His bright cat eyes flashed with excitement. "But how?"

"Have you forgotten? We're the greatest predators on the planet. We can travel by day or night, run faster than the wind, and eat almost anything. What's to stop us?"

"Nothing. But..." The Jaguar Boy's confidence sagged. "Just us against the FFP?"

"Would you rather sit here for the rest of your life or fight to change the world?"

A smiled dawned across his face. "Fight."

"I thought so."

And then Eden issued her first command to her trusted second. "Bring me some of Newman's Cure. For Iverson. Hurry."

Kevon hesitated. "But we can't trust the Maquis."

"No, but I believe we can trust him. We have to start somewhere."

He nodded, ready to leave, when Eden stopped him with another order. She described the cave where she had left her father. "Follow my scent and bring him back."

As Kevon took off, she realized he would be a good soldier, the beginning of an army, at least.

The alarm screech of a harpy eagle ripped through the air, calling her attention. Eden watched it soar high overhead. Just like her, the great raptor made a pair bond for life.

If Bramford survived the coming ordeal, Eden hoped to live out her life with him. But if he should die, she would follow him into death. Without love, this life was but an empty shell.

She slanted her gaze to the north, as if she could send a message along her mate's trail. *I'm coming for you.* Though thousands of miles away and probably drugged to oblivion, Bramford was thinking of her too—Eden felt it like an echo of her heartbeat.

If only she knew that they would be reunited, she could face anything. And through the dark and murky ether, her heart reached out to his with Aunt Emily's poignant words.

If you were coming in the fall,
I'd brush the summer by
With half a smile and half a spurn,
As housewives do a fly.

If I could see you in a year,
I'd wind the months in balls,
And put them each in separate drawers,
Until their time befalls.

If only centuries delayed,
I'd count them on my hand,
Subtracting till my fingers dropped
Into Van Diemen's land.

If certain, when this life was out,
That yours and mine should be,
I'd toss it yonder like a rind,
And taste eternity.

But now, all ignorant of the length
Of time's uncertain wing,
It goads me, like the goblin bee,
That will not state its sting.

Closing her eyes, Eden offered a silent prayer. *Mother Earth, I will do whatever I must. Only let me see Bramford again.*

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